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# EC

## **Synopsis:**

In the distant future, after humanity's revival following an apocalyptic event, an inquisitive woman, a young man abandoned by his country, a youth seeking redemption and an isolated young prodigy meet by chance in a game promoted by a certain company. Tricked into running an Academy, the tale follows their lives and adventures in a world not their own.

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# Prologue 1: Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

\*Several shadows dart across a grass swept valley, followed by many longer, shorter shadows\*

"Bell-ne, stick to the wall after we clear this ridge and ambush them. Till, keep running for 10 seconds then start casting. Rick, do your thing."

Three of the four figures gave a quick nod as two of them visibly slow down and turn back. About 10 meters behind them, a large red wolf is chasing them, with a dozen other smaller wolves right behind it.

"Here we go!"

One of the two figure stops quickly, then pours out a small mound of chalklike dust from one of his many packs while the other releases an arrow aimed at the charging wolf, causing it to leap to the side. The well-muscled archer, with blonde hair down to his neck and a rugged face to go with his above average body, smirks as he dashes and jumps off the ridge. There is a yelp of pain far behind the lead wolf, which has already started running again. The lone figure kicks the mound at the lead wolf, and takes off for the ridge.

\*tatata\*

\*koro\*

\*tatata\*

While running the young man drops some objects just before jumping

off the ridge, following the archer. The wolf didn't suffer any damage from the kick nor did it slow down, but it did have to close its eyes as it blindly tries to bite the figure, barking and snarling in its frenzy. A large dust cloud forms behind the wolf as it keeps moving blindly, ending up kicking the remaining part of the mound. It howls in pain as soon as it stumbles out of the dust cloud, as though it stepped on something painful. It struggles before falling off the ridge.

"NYAAAAAAA!"

Waiting at the bottom of the ridge was a big, lean, well-endowed, halberd wielding cat-eared red-haired warrior. Covered by a leather cuirass, leather skirt and a cloak, the emphasis seems to be maneuverability instead of protection. Her halberd swings up in a wide arc to meet the wolf midfall, slicing deeply into it. A faint red glow traces the path of the arc. The wolf gives off a sharp angry cry, shortly followed by a \*zudon\*. The warrior had used the halberd's and the falling wolf's momentum to slam it into the ground with its blade in tow, effectively severing its spine.

The man that was the last to jump off the ridge turns back and gives a sympathetic "Ow". He didn't get to dwell on it for long though, as the rest of the pack soon catches up and charges blindly into the dust cloud following their now dead leader. With a rack strapped to his back that looked like a seatless chair and the various packs strapped to it, the man looks like a peddler from ages past. His tanned face and limbs contrasts with his beige colour tunic and khakis. He shows a satisfied half smile as he observes the situation a little away from the ridge, it seems the improvised trap continues to claim more victims as the dust cloud stubbornly clings to the air.

"NYAAA! NYAAAAAAA!"

The warrior's halberd is swung overhead again, the red glow faithfully following its lead. With her clawed feet planted firmly into the ground, she twists her body as soon as she cuts the first wolf temporarily suspending it. Giving a roar, she turns and swings the halberd into another falling wolf and brought it down. \*zubon\* The first wolf is cleanly cut in half while the second wolf went limp after a \*pachi\*. Four more wolves fall from the cliff, one with an arrow embedded in its shoulder. They yelp and whine as they remain stunned from the fall, \*zaku\* \*zaku\* \*zubon\* \*zaku\* blood follows the red glow the same way it was following the halberd.

The man continues to stare intently at the small ridge where they jumped off from, scanning the area. The dust cloud has risen a fair bit off the ground now, with the remaining wolves pacing and growling in or near it. He looks back to his ally, who is in a position even further away from the ridge. Both her hands were raised in the direction of the remaining wolves. Staying still for a few moment, \*panpan\* her hands suddenly comes together. A chorus of yelps soon follows. The man turns back toward the ridge, where the dust cloud had flattened significantly. He keeps looking at the ridge to verify that all the wolves have indeed perished.

"All Clear!"

The three of them turn to the lone figure that emerged from the top of the hill, he had apparently ran back up the hill from another direction after jumping off the ridge. The warrior surveys the bodies shrewn across the grass, "I'm going to gather up the corpses, you just do your thing Kun".

The man gives a thumb up, "Thanks Bell-ne". Taking the rack off his back, Kun starts to unpack his bags to take out his tools. With his plain look, average looking face and medium build, he looks like one of

those unimportant extras that always die in the opening act in some disaster film. With a set of knives in different shapes and sizes, he starts working on the [Alpha Wolf]'s carcass.

Despite her petite size, Till was the first to finish as she only has to gather the loots and salvageable items and to throw the dead wolves from the top of the ridge to the bottom for Bell. She had the widest grin after jumping down from the ridge and sat next to Kun, watching with her pale gray eyes as he dismantles the carcasses. The stench of blood fills the air as a sudden gust swept through the valley, not that any one of them minds, especially not after what they had gone through. Her pale aquamarine hair, as though a painter had forgot to fill in the pond with his watercolour, flutters with the wind before returning to the middle of her back. With a height of slightly over a meter and pale features, she gives the scene a feel of dissonance.

A soft buzz vibrates near Kun's ear, he stops his hands as he waits for the message that follows.

"Nothing's around, we are safe I think. Will meet up with you guys shortly"

"Alright Rick, careful on your way back"

By the time Rick returns, Bell had already finished retrieving the bodies and was already checking her equipments. Till busies herself by scribbling something in her book next to Bell. Kun, who was a stone-throw away, was separating the last of the meat from their bones.

"Rick-ni! Welcome back! Here are your arrows!" The small girl takes a bundle of arrows next to the half-cat's armour and return it to the somewhat tired looking archer.

"Thanks shrimp, I'm going to start a fire, it seems like there's going to be some excessive meat, Kun's probably going to cook us some." Rick give the girl's head a ruffle, messing up her hair. Bell was visibly drooling as she looked up from her equipments at the mention of meat.

Combing her fingers through her hair to clear out any tangles, Till starts digging into her bag "Alright, I'll get the books ready." Bell starts wiping off her equipment, occasionally catching herself before drooling again while the other two go about their tasks like well oiled machines.

It didn't take long before the small mountain of corpses was cleared. The left over parts of the carcasses turns into particles of light, drifting into the ground. Kun was making a face after finishing.

"Something the matter Kun-ni?"

"Hmm, no, just find it strange that some of the weaker wolves gave better quality pelts and meat."

"Oh." Bell quickly grabbed one of her books and jolts it down.

"So any requests?" Kun cocks his head as he gives the pans and utensils a wipe with a clean cloth.

"GRILLED MEAT!" The three shout in unison.

"Okay, I'll just make something quick, then we can head back to town."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Auuooonnn..." A soft groan escapes from a slightly bulgy humanoid tabby cat as it leans back onto the grassy hill and lick its paw.

"And that's why you will never get a boyfriend" A slightly rounded archer tease.



"Not like you are much better."

The two went back and forth as Kun and Till cleans up the campfire and starts checking the loots they got.

"7 small damaged pelts, 1 medium red pelt, 3 small pelts and 2 small flawless pelts. As for the meat, 3 sets are left... how many were there?" Till asks with her head tilted.

"9 sets."

Till's eyes goes wide and look back at the two pudgy-like things arguing behind them and look back at the campfire. "Gl.." She stops herself from commenting as she remember how much she ate as well. "Everyone rose by 4 levels, the three of you are level 6 now."

"4 levels from 13 wolves? What level were they?"

"The smaller wolves are level 17 and the [Alpha Wolf] is level 20."

This time it was Kun's eyes that goes wide. "Just how strong is Bell-ne?" The two of them cringe as they recall how she dealt with the fallen wolves. Strapping the pelts onto the rack and dividing the meat into various packs between the 4 of them, they quickly clean up the site.

"Okay, let's go back."

Kun gave the two a heads-up as Till helps him balance the stack of pelt on his rack.

"mmhmm"

The two had stopped arguing at some point and were simply enjoying being happily stuffed.

"You two need some serious self-control." Kun chuckles as he starts walking toward the main road.

"Don't you mean they need to learn how to cook?" Till expertly dropped a stone into the well.

*[T/N: Proverb meaning kicking someone while they are down.  
(???? = going down well dropping stone)]*

The two behind them couldn't say anything in return and starts waddling after them.

## Prologue 2: Re-Quest

Getting back to town was relatively easy since there are very few hostile monsters in the area aside from the wolves and anacondas. Traveling in the world of **Amoaltz** by foot is actually pretty quick, immortals are able to travel 3 times faster than the natives without effort.

Immortals are what the natives call the users, since as far as they know, no users could ever die permanently. Even though users can travel fast, there's still a problem. **Amoaltz** is too vast, absurdly vast. It's said that it would take at least 5 years for users just to move across the continent of **Zrewheig** from one end to another and that's at the narrowest part.

"That was actually pretty easy." Rick had his hands behind his head as he walks nonchalantly, his bulging stomach went back to normal during the short walk back to town.

"Yeah, I didn't actually expect to succeed, at least not at our level. We can probably thank Bell-ne for that."

"Yeah! Bell-ne was all like whoosh! And the wolves were like \*zubon\* \*zaku\* \*zaku\* \*zubon\*" Till was excitedly moving her hands trying to imitate the arcing halberd.

"You don't need to thank that monster, brute strength was all she ever had."

With her eyes already twitching, Rick's last comment was the final straw. She casually trips him as they walk toward the town gate. He

managed to avoid falling down, but...

"Oh shit!" He landed on a loose rock with the leg he was hopping on and stumbles toward a guard, ramming face first into the guard's crotch.

The guard bends over from the impact, landing on top of Rick as they fell. The group and the second guard gathers around the two and help get them up.

"Ah... sorry about that." Rick was sheepishly apologizing with his right eye watering.

<<Breeze>>!! Till quickly summons a gentle breeze to remove the dirt from the two bodies.

"Sorry about that uncle! Rick-ni is really clumsy!"

The guard just gives her a tired smile and nods. Turning toward Rick, he gave a sharp glare. The group enters the town, with Rick bowing toward the guard repeatedly as he enters.

"Thanks a lot Bell." Rick makes a sour face after walking beyond the sight of the gate.

He isn't stupid enough to cause a commotion with the guard.

"You can thank that big mouth of yours."

Till and Kun just press their lips firmly together to suppress their laughter.

"Let's hand in the quest, it's getting late." The ginger catwoman led the way toward the fur trader located near the caravan station near the town square. Although it's called a town square, it's just clearing with

the only paved road running through it. The town of **Feia** is a former frontier village with no affiliation with any kingdoms, it relies on hunting, some limited farming, and skilled labour for its survival. It is ruled by a council of elders that are selected from the top of their respective trades.

It took no more than a minute before they reached the trade post. "Afternoon immortals, did you manage to get those pelts?" The slightly chubby middle-aged man with a fur hat of some sort greeted them as they approached.

"Right here." Bell grabs 5 small damaged pelts, removes the straps and take them off of Kun's rack on his back. She places them onto the counter while towering over the fur trader. He gives an audible gulp as he starts inspecting them. The rest of the group was quietly giving each other meaningful glances.

The trader finish his inspection and tries to say something while averting his eyes from the felinoid shadowing over him. He opens his mouth, but snaps to give Kun a double take with his eyes wide open. "Can I see that?!" Everyone gave each other a look and just shrug. Bell repeat the same movement and placed the rest of the pelts onto the counter.

The trader had beads of sweat on his forehead as he inspects the red pelt gingerly, revealing a grin as though he was a cat that had eaten a canary. "I'll pay you triple... no, quintuple the original price for these!"

Bell crosses her arms, lifts her head and stares down at him. Showing a solemn face, the rest of the group caught on and emulate her.

"Ten times?"

The catwoman just give a snort while Rick raise one of his eyebrows questioningly at the trader.

"Twelve ti.."

\*zubon\*

Bell dropped her hands and lean heavily onto the counter, the impact was followed by a small creaking noise as the counter protests against her strength. The trader gulps and hangs his head in defeat. He had been caught red handed. He quickly clasp his hands in front of his heart. "I request the additional pelts be sold to me." A transparent, floating panel immediately showed up in front of Bell, showing the value of the quest from the trader. She hit the refuse panel without a glance.

"But.. why?" The trader was surprised the request was refused, his face falls as the prospect of another trader getting the pelts shakes him to the core.

"You know why, you offered twelve times when the red pelt alone is easily 100 times. Do you take me for a fool?" She leans further down on the counter \*gishi gishi\*, putting her face right in front of his. The trader immediately understood, taking a gulp as he steadies his shaking knees, he reach for a golden metal card from under the counter and offered it. "The request and this...?"

Bell snatched the card and hit the accept panel after the trader redo his request. She walks off, with Kun and Rick following soon after. "Thanks for bonus uncle!" Till skips along to catch up with the group.

Bell leaned against a building and let out a deep breath as soon as they got out of sight of the trader.

"Way to go Bell! So you aren't just muscle for brain!"

"What... just happened?"

"Uncle gave us a bonus!"

\*kon\*

After giving Rick a quick rap on the head, Bell smiles. "He was trying to rip us off. So I pretended to be mad and scared him a bit."

"Your face sure scared him stiff. Bad breath too?"

\*konkon\*

Bell resumes after smacking Rick twice. "I learned something after dropping to o," both Kun and Rick look sullen as they remember, "{Request}s are based on the value of the giver, so I used that to force a fair value for the pelts."

"So you can actua..." Rick dodged away before finishing his sentence.

Ignoring their usual antics, Kun cuts to the point. "So...how much did we get?"

"Actually, I didn't check." She takes out the card and bring up the {Quest} window.

"So you..."

\*doka\*

Till gives Rick a swift kick to his shin to stop his interruption. Kun just smiles before turning back to Bell expectantly.

"I didn't look at the quest the first time, but it looks like we have..." She blinks a few time. "500 gold for the quest and another 100 gold from the card."

"Ooooooooooooo! We are rich! We are rich!" Till jumped around happily while the two guys were doing their little happy dance.

Bell quickly splits the gold from her pouch, giving 125 gold each and gives Kun the card.

"Go and get an [Enchanted Pack] when you can."

"Ohh! Good idea!" Everyone nods in agreement.

"Okay, I'm going to the inn to log out."

"Ditto!"

"Yeah yeah, let's go, shrimp."

"I'm going to look around before logging."

After giving each other farewells, Kun went browsing at the various shops. Seeing nothing worthwhile, he checked out the {Quest Bulletin}.

"Son of a bitch, they didn't make it." Kun reveals a shit-eating grin.

Near the bottom of the board, a wooden plank advertising its job hangs.



## Contract

Porters and reserve members for the [Barghest Dungeon]  
Contact Tabeus(#17) for details.

The \*bleep\* that made Kun and his two hard-earned friends that survived the ordeal together dropped to level 0 must have failed their {Raid}. Kun kept his smile all the way to the inn and logged out after leaving them a message. ["You reap what you sow, those \*bleep\* failed the [Barghest Dungeon], see you guys later!"]

*[T/N:: ???? , ???? = You plant a melon, you get a melon. You sow a bean, you get a bean. Proverb means "what goes around comes around", it became "you reap what you sow".]*

# Prologue 3: From Hero, to Zero, to a God

*Mmmm, guess I should log in soon.*

\*grr\* \*bamu\*

A gray mass of fur decides to latch itself to my right leg with its mouth.

"Alright Gui, it's almost done, just wait okay?"

\*grrrrrrrrr\*

I reach down and give Gui's neck a good rub as I waited for the meat to almost sear. I got back up and flipped the meat over in the pan.

\*grr grr grr\*

Gui playful bites the air and pace behind me as I make our meal since we often eat together. Dinner time was fast approaching and we managed to catch a duck earlier today, so it was a meal we were both looking forward to. To be honest, I didn't think it would work, but now we have another food source we can hunt.

"Okay, go sit down Gui."

\*grr yelp\*

The gray fox happily gets to his seat next to the table, his tail slowly sweeping back and forth. I placed our meal on the table, sprinkled

some seasoning on my plate and unceremoniously dug in. \*bari bari\* Gui already started eating as soon I placed the plate in front of him. I merely smile inwardly as I resume eating. Truthfully, I'm grateful to Gui, I don't know how I would have ended up if it wasn't for him.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*grr grr grrrr\*

Gui says his usual goodbye as I waves him off.

*Probably off to uncle's place again. How long has it been now?*

I continue to clean up the kitchen and table as my idle thoughts drift.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Kun-ni, Kun-ni! Over here!"

A short, pale girl in a plain, pastel sundress waves her hand enthusiastically at Kun while a blonde youth and a large feline bickers with each other.

"We don't need a mount!"

"Yes we do! Well, maybe not for you what with your fatass and all."

"I'll show you fat!"

"Umm... what's going on now?" Kun turns to the short girl as he walks up to the group.

The catwoman already had the blonde youth in a boston crab.

"Rick-ni suddenly said we should get a mount to hold our stuff. Bell-ne said it was a waste of money, since you are getting an [Enchanted Pack]."

The blonde youth is tapping the floor vigorously shouting "I give! I give!"

"Umm... about that pack... apparently they don't sell it here."

Bell drops the squirming youth's legs.

"Oh? Guess they only sell them in the cities. Hm.. Alright, want to head to one now?"

"Yay! City! City!" Till jumps around happily while Rick gets up slowly while holding onto his back.

"And the mount?"

Bell put her face into one of her paws and sighs, "fine, get a mount." Rick's rugged face shines like the sun. "But Till is picking the mount." The once bright sun sets as quickly as it appeared.

After pooling the necessary money from everyone, Bell gives it to Till along with everyone's minimum requirement. The three chat and start comparing what they brought over the last few days since they were last together. Their individual schedules for the last few days didn't allow them to log in at the same time, so they each went and hunted solo or in pairs and just shopped around.

Bell went and traded her old halberd and half her money for a new custom made extendable halberd made with high grade mithril alloy.

It's unheard of for the average low level user to own such a weapon, but none of them are exactly normal. Unlike other softwares and games, there are no level restrictions for any equipments, so many have taken advantage of that. On the other hand, high level weapons can just as easily harm their owners if the owner cannot control it properly. Her defensive gear remains the same, giving her a feel of some savage Amazon goddess coming down with her shining, holy weapon.

Rick spent very little of the money since he relies on bow and arrows, and he can craft arrows himself given the raw material. But he did ask a blacksmith to make him some caltrops seeing how effective they were when Kun used it with the dust cloud. Even without the dust, the caltrops can easily buy him some time to get away in a sticky situation.

Kun merely upgraded some of his worn out packs and bags, there's nothing he particularly wants since he haven't decided on a [Class] yet. Unlike Bell who switched and became a [Cat Warrior] as soon as she got back to level 1 due to her unexpected racial trait, and Rick, who also switch to [Archer] at level 1, Kun chose to stay as a novice until he sees something he likes.

Choosing a class allow a user to fully utilize that class' main stats. For example, in Bell's case, it's {Strength} and {Agility}. Due to her class, whenever she attacks, a red aura surrounds her weapon which gives it additional damage, speed and other bonuses. A novice doesn't get any bonus from the stats, so Kun didn't add any from the level ups.

Something shadows over them, even the tall Bell, while they talk. The three of them turns around to look as the shadow remains. Slowly looking from the ground upward, the three recognize the sundress sitting on top of the furry blob in front of them despite the glaring sun behind the figure. She is easily 2-3 meters off the ground.

"Look! Isn't Sammy cute?!"

\*kero kero\*

The white, furry blob seems to croak happily at the praise. The three look at each other, Bell is the first to react. "Did it... just croak?" Shaking her head, she turns to the guys "What did you two ask for anyways?"

"Something that can even support your fatass."

\*kon\*

"Something sturdy."

Bell drops her head, "something white."

Seeing how happy Till is, the three just smile and decides to make the best of it. Everyone throws their non-essential items into the large saddle pack on Sammy's back and heads toward the nearest city in the kingdom of **Sardon**, with Till riding on the white furry blob.

They follow the only paved road towards one of the town's four main gates. Normal citizens give them odd, curious stares and glances. Immortals aren't exact rare, even in an out-of-place town such as this one since occasional immortal traders come by every few weeks. But the sight of two average looking men leading some savage cat Amazon and a little girl happily riding on a huge, furry, albino beast, that most wouldn't want even if it was given to them, following right behind, stuns them.

The group gives the guards a wave as they leave the gate. The guards,

just as stunned as the citizens, absentmindedly wave back. It isn't until the group was out of sight that one of the guards snap out of it. "Oh shit!"

The other guard snaps out of it too. "OH! SHIT! Get the captain! I will inform the elders!"

The town guards are running around rapidly, interviewing everyone that saw the group that walked by. At the same time, a militia forms in front of the gate. A tough looking captain with scars all over his face is shouting orders, making plans and organizing logistics.

A guard runs up to the captain, snapping to attention. "Sir! Information to report!"

The captain moves his hands quickly and order the squires to get some horses ready. "Out with it."

"Sir! A shopkeep overheard them saying they were heading for Sardon!"

"Good work, now get your ass ready, we are going to chase them down come hell or high water! We must bring him back here at all costs!" The captain starts giving out the order to the militia to get on a mount and to head to **Sardon**.

Being none the wiser, the group steadily heads toward **Sardon**. Travellers and merchants alike give them a curious glance as they pass by each other. Demihuman mercenaries all look at Bell with either envy, respect or challenge. The group just shrug and carry on, not aware that they are standing out.

"Why does everyone all stare at us?"

"Bet it's-"

\*kon\*

"But-"

\*konkon\*

"I didn't-"

\*konkonkondokadoka\*

"Guess we are a strange group? Sammy isn't exactly normal and neither are you, Bell."

Bell starts her windup out of habit and stops herself just before smacking Kun's head.

Realizing that he is just saying it as it is, she pull her arm back and tries to hide her embarrassment.

"That's because Sammy is cute and fluffy and smart and fluffy!" Till gives the beast a big hug laying down rubbing her head back and forth on it while it croaks happily. They kept walking, ignoring the twitching corpse behind them.

The three of them walked for a while before a figure run passed them, followed by a gust of wind.

"Wasn't that Rick? What's that dumbass up to?"

Kun turns back to take a look while Bell tries to PM Rick.

\*ponpon\*



Kun taps her shoulder before she completes her message, when she looks back, there was a dust cloud greeting her in the horizon.

"Oh look! There are a lot of uncles on horses!"

"Shit! I'm going to kill that idiot! Let's go!"

"Come on Till, we are going to catch up to Rick and get out of here"

"Okay~~~ <<Gust>>!!"

The three of them dashes off into the direction of Rick, with assistance of Till's wind magic.

Far behind them, the mounted militias are desperately screaming "Wait!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Just what the hell did you do, Rick?! Did you grope up some rich NPC's daughter?!"

"No! I would look, but I would never grope! You should know that!"

Bell grew up with him for the better part of his life. He might be a loudmouth and an idiot, but she can say he isn't the type to do that.

"Then what did you do?!"

"I have no idea!"

"We can sort this out later! Let's just get away for now! ... Wait... doesn't this place look familiar?"

Both the archer and felinoid looks at the surrounding.

"Yay! We are going to see headmistress again!"

The three of them gulp and look behind them, giving serious consideration to facing those horsemen instead.

The headmistress is their saviour, but also their worst nightmare. After they were forcefully disconnected after dropping to level 0 as a result of the [Barghest Dungeon] sacrifice, their vessels were rescued by Till and said headmistress.

Vessels are what the natives call the bodies of users that aren't logged in. While users are logged out, their vessels are extremely vulnerable to theft and murder, that's why most users opt to log out in inns where there is some security. Higher level users would log out in their guilds or even a castle if they have access to one.

The plan was to dissect them if they don't wake up (log in) within a week's time. Fortunately they all logged in a day before the unknown deadline. Since there were never any level 0 immortals that the headmistress is aware of, she used them as guinea pigs and made them go through a ton of hellish experiments. Well, at least for Bell and Rick. Kun breezed through them as though he had went through those trials before. Fighting a level 3 [Huntsman Rabbit] with whatever was available, both Bell and Rick thought they would die countless times.

There was only one road in and out of the academy, so they know they are between a rock and a hard place. Seeing no alternatives, they head

straight toward the academy at full speed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sister Till!" A high pitch scream echoes in the air, a young demihuman with pointy ears runs toward the group after leaping off a watchtower. Immediately following her were about 4 dozen children and teenagers.

All of the gathered youngsters were demihumans, some were closer to humans, others were closer to beasts. The older ones looks at Bell with obvious admiration while the others happily look up at Sammy and Till.

"Big sis is going to meet headmistress, be careful okay~~? Don't let them play too rough Sammy~".

The children all gave a cheer and rushed the furry blob while the teenagers wear sullen expressions. The oldest of them twitches his head towards the main building, not waiting to explain in front of the children.

After entering the building, all but the oldest teenager stood guard at the door. The oldest one, with bullhorns protruding from his head, starts leading them toward the back.

"The headmistress have been sick and will soon pass away, she told us not to worry since you all will be coming back soon." The group looks at each other with a frown, especially Till since she had been with the headmistress for so long.

\*don don\*

The bullhorned teenager knocked a door firmly twice, before letting the group in. He gave a bow toward a figure resting on a rocking chair before leaving the room.

"Headmistress....!" Till runs toward the frail resting figure and holds her hands.

"Ho ho, what's the matter Till? Still a crybaby?" The old woman smile softly without opening her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Out in the woods before the academy.

"Stick together men! We are in the [Forest of Illusions], don't stray and just follow me!

\* \* \* \* \*

"No! De'muel said you were dying!"

"That's right child, but there's nothing to be afraid of, everything that lives will eventually die. I assume that's also true for you so called immortals."

Till sobs uncontrollably into the old woman's lap while Bell and Kun look uncomfortably at the scene. Rick tries to lean against something a

table...

\*bishhi bishi bishitto gasha\*

and breaks it, causing an extremely expensive looking crystal vase to fall to pieces in a spectacular fashion.

"Cough cough"

"Oh my, you broke my last will and testament..." The headmistress says softly, Till follow up with a "what the hell are you doing" glare.

"Well, you can make it by taking up my last request." Both Kun and Bell also starts to stare at Rick.

"Okay, okay, whatever it is." Rick have a dumbfound wide eye expression on his face. "Just how expensive was that vase..." he whispers to himself.

"Here, I request that you fulfill this." The old woman clasps her hands weakly before her heart before taking out a small envelope out from her sleeves. Rick hits the accept reluctantly as Kun moves up to take grab it.

"The take good care of each other, okay? There's nothing to be sad about." She gives Till a gentle pat on the head before putting her hands together on her lap.

The room became silent.

"Headmistress?!" Till shakes the resting figure, but there is no response. She tries shaking some more before burying her face into the lap of the resting figure. Soft sobs can be heard just beyond the doors. If one were to look closely, they would see a mischievous smile

accompanying a lone trail of tear down the old woman's eye.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bell console Till and the rest of the teenagers while Kun and Rick walk off. Kun break the silence by asking "So what was her request?"

Opening the envelope, Rick pulls a piece of paper. His face froze and goosebumps appear all over his body. Kun grab the paper and takes a look himself. He becomes a statue right next to Rick.

{Request}s have penalties attached to them if a Quester decides to abandon a quest. They either have to repay the Requester at 50% value of the {Request} or suffer [Divine Retribution] of equal value. The Requester may reduce or waive the penalty together. But the Requester in this case passed away, which mean Rick would have to suffer Divine Retribution. On the paper was "Take care of the children, the vase should be worth at least 10,000 gold, enough to keep the academy running for 10 years." So to fulfill the request, he would have to be able to fund or run the academy for 10 years, the [Divine Retribution] from that would be unimaginable.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Halt!" The pointed ear youth shouts at the group of approaching horsemen while drawing an arrow, aiming squarely at them.

The horsemen starts to draw their swords, but the leading horseman hold up his hand, ordering his men to sheath them.

"We mean you no harm! We just need to talk to a young man that happens to be here, he has blonde hair up to his neck and is an archer." The captain throw his swords onto the ground, dismounts and approached the youth slowly with his hands up. "Please, we just need to talk to him."

Recalling Till and her friends, the youth whistles sharply, twice. All the children that were playing with Sammy stops immediately and run toward the main building. The children drags and pushes Sammy together with them when he didn't move. "Wait right there, I'll get him. De'muel! Get the one called Rick out here!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Seriously? You guys chased me all the way out here just for this?" Rick is beyond flabbergasted.

"Wait, you guys said you will accept any price as long as it's manageable, correct?" Kun interrupts Rick before he can refuse.

All guardsmen were either on one knee or prostrating all together. Rick raise one of his eyebrows a Kun.

Via PM

"You can use this chance to see if you can fulfill that request of yours"

"But you are asking me to whore myself out!"

"You already smacked one bird, seeing how you are so accident prone, you are bound to smack another, just think of it as smacks you can control this time. The first step is always the hardest!"

"I'm not that... fine fine!"

"Fine! Let's go! But your lords are going to be paying out of their asses for this!"

All the guardsmen had a smile on their face, including the captain. Slamming his right hand over his heart, the captain gives Rick a salute. The rest of the guards follows.

"Send us a PM when you are done, we will settle the matter here." Kun waves them off as the guards form a multilayer ring around Rick and escorts him to back to **Feia**.

The militia was formed in a hurry to escort Rick back. It appears that the day Rick stumbled into the guard, a miracle happened. All the doctors diagnosed the guard as impotent, but after the bump, his wife was pregnant a few days after. There were doubts at first, but when she readily made a {Blood Oath}, all the doubts were gone. The guard was crying tears of joy, even while at work, praising that immortal. The rumour soon made its way to the ruling elders. Since there were quite a few of them without heirs, a frenzy was started to hunt down this god of fertility. The hopeful elders ordered that he was to be treated as a VIP as though it's a State Visit and not a hair were to be missing on him. Everything was made available to get the sacred immortal's blessing, as long as it is possible, it can be offered.



# Zinnia Academy

"Headmistress! Look! There are people sleeping here!" The ever cheerful little girl beside me points at the three bodies laying at the edge of the forest.

*A battle? Out here?*

"Slow down child, let me take a look first." I told her as I slowly approach the bodies. One can never be too careful, especially now that Immortals started to appear frequently over the last six years.

Using my staff, I start to check out those bodies. "«Arcane Hold»! «Analyze»!"

\*fuwa fuwa\*

Their vital information enters my head as my magic completes its task. I can't believe what I'm seeing before me.

*I was expecting just 1 level 0 immortals, but 3? Was the [Vision] wrong?*

"What's matter headmistress?" The bubbly girl next to me look at me with a concern expression. I guess I must look pretty distraught.

"It's nothing dear, let's bring these people back."

"Oooh~, they might catch a cold out here."

"That too child, let's bring these friends back okay? But if they don't

wake up, we can always do a dissection."

"Okay~~~"

I slowly bring the three floating bodies behind me back home.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ahhh!!! Why isn't this thing dying?!" A scream with a tinge of desperation pierces the air.

"«Bash!» «Bash!» «Bash!»...«&Backslide!raquo;" A youth with dashing blonde hair repeatedly use his offensive skill with a wooden sword on the [Huntsman Rabbit] while desperately dodging away when it tries to strike back.

"«Bash!»" In the adjacent field, a tall woman with red hair circles another [Huntsman Rabbit] slowly and counters at the last second with same skill as the blonde youth when it jumps in to attack. The rabbit flies back 2 meters, but suffering no damage, looking confused.

*Same skill used completely differently, as expected of these immortals. But why can't they do any damage?*

Taking my eyes off of them, I turn toward the plain looking one in the field behind me.

A man with short, black hair holds a medium length tree branch with his left hand in the lead while holding the wooden sword on the right. The branch is covered in scratches, but other than that, he looks perfectly fine. The rabbit on the other hand is bruised all over, with a

large swelling that's obscuring its right eye.

*He only used bash once, then stopped when it didn't have an effect. He had been relying on regular strikes since, yet the rabbit looks like it's about done. This one has some quick judgement.*

The man walks slowly toward the rabbit, neither rushing not complacent. As soon as it makes a dash toward him, he swing the tree branch outward, taking the rabbit's strike with it. Right after, a fast overhand slash made with the wooden sword land squarely on its head.

\*bushari\*

I can barely hear that soft, clean crack of the rabbit's skull. The man picks up the rabbit by the ears. "Wish hunting rabbit was actually this easy," such a strange comment accompanies his sigh. He walks up and drop the rabbit carcass next to me before backing away slowly. It appears Till-chan told them about my offhanded joke.

"Guys! Don't use skills! It appears we can't do any damage with them at level o!"

*Ah, that would explain it. And I didn't say they can't help each other, just not interfere.*

I turn back to watching the two remaining fighters with expectation,

"What?! Bloody thing! JUST DIE ALREADY!" The rabbit froze, even I was taken aback by that woman's roar. She, who have been using counters almost exclusively, runs up to the rabbit with a heavy two handed slash. The rabbit snaps out of its daze and blocks with its oversized claws. I look on eagerly and isn't disappointed.

Tossing the wooden sword aside on the follow through to her left side, she brings her long leg out from the right and kicks the rabbit right in the head. It floats upward a bit before she execute a beautiful scissor kick, sending it in the air. Retrieving the sword next to her, she readies herself in a jodan stance.

"RRRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA"

She roars again.

*Is she really an immortal and not a demihuman?*

\*zushin\*

The sword was brought down with the rabbit, leaving a loud impact. Even the other children turns to look in curiosity. The rabbit's corpse scatters into speckles of lights, leaving a very damaged pelt behind.

"OOOOOHHHHHHHHHH~::~!" Till was excitedly watching the scene, I didn't even noticed when she logged in. I don't understand why the immortals use such weird terms, but as long as the meaning gets through, it's all the same.

As though awaken by the roar, the blonde youth began his assault. Throwing small pieces of rocks that he likely got while running around, he throws them at the rabbit as soon it attacks. I don't think it would do any damage, but no doubt the rabbit is angry now.

"Ha! «Backslide»! Hm!" The youth jumps in with a slash then dodge backward right away, with a smooth moment, he threw a rock at the rabbit before it can counter attack.

*Is he a one trick-pony?*

Unexpectedly, he throws a handful of rocks at the rabbit this time around. "HA! «Backslide»! HHAAA!" It looks like he over jumped his slash, but it was used to get behind the rabbit as it recovers from hitting the rocks away. It was followed by a \*dosun\* when he used the recoil from the backslide to swing his sword into the back of the rabbit's head.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, we are clear to go if we beat this?" The tall woman towering over me asks.

"Yes child, you are free to go once you do this one last test." I have all the data already from all the various tests before. This is just extra training for them. "De'muel, prepare the others." I move toward the edge of the field while De'muel gives a long whistle.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" The blonde one seems particular excitable.

"Don't worry, Rick, just run around and throw rock when appropriate, especially if you see them attacking one of us. Bell and I will try to hold their attention and try to get an opening. If one of them is vulnerable, attack it at once if you can."

The two other nods.

*Quite a tactician we have here.*

The three of them stands back to back as the 6 [Huntsman Rabbit] approach them.

"RAA!" "«Backslide»!" "Hm!"

The black-haired man and the tall woman makes wide horizontal sweeps with their swords while the blonde youth slides back before running off.

One of the rabbits tries to chase after him but it leaps backward when a swinging tree branch intercepts its path. It is now 6 vs 2, the rabbits are small, so there isn't really any major disadvantage. They stand still for a moment, sizing up each other. Unexpectedly, the shorthair man starts shaking and starts running away. The rabbits, seeing their chance, jumps at the woman at once.

\*ton\*

One of the jumping rabbit flies sideways mid-jump. The other rabbits turns to look at the stone that suddenly appeared from nowhere.

\*zushin\*

Another flies in the air from the woman's sudden strike. She moves back quickly to avoid the rest of slashing claws aimed at her. The rabbits turn their attention back toward her, slowly spreads out after landing, trying to surround her.

\*dosun dosun dosun dosun\*

The blackhaired man that ran away actually ran a few steps, then turned immediately, using the tall woman as a screen, and ran to her left. He is now standing over two dead rabbit that were stunned from the thrown stone and sword strike.

I look to the woman's right to check on the blonde youth. He's in an odd stance, at least a stance I've never seen before. Holding a stone with both hands, he has one of his shoulders point squarely at the rabbits. He's looking over that shoulder attentively, suddenly, he lifts his leading leg up and then throws the stone with all his might.

*Ah, it's a throwing stance.*

Following the stone, I see another rabbit get taken out. The short-haired man, who had joined the woman at some point when I was looking at the youth, rushes toward the remaining rabbits while the woman goes after the stunned rabbit with a \*zushin\*.

\*bushari bushari\*

The man actually managed to kill two of the rabbit alone.

"Watch out!" The 3rd rabbit had ignored the man and is in mid-strike against the woman's exposed back. The blonde youth threw another stone along with his warning.

"«BASH»!" The woman roars and quickly do a full swing with her sword. The rabbit have its eyes wide open at the unexpected speed of the swing and brings its claws up to block it. The sword swing meets the rabbit as the stone was coming right behind it.

\*bushu\*

Rabbit and stone, both are now sailing through the air.

"Were you aiming for me you dumbass?"

"It's not my fault you are the size of a barn!"

blahblahblah

The two bickers as I look at the still flying masses.

*Just how far are they going to go?*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bye, Headmistress! I will be back soon!" Till waves happily as she leaves with the three immortals.

*I need to get everything ready.*

\*gohon\*

I cover my mouth with a cloth as I cough, red blood slowly seep through.

*I don't have much time.*

"De'muel, Mak'ra, Isnic, you three come with me. The rest of you, supervise the kids."

"Yes ma'am!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The 3 children are crying in front of me.

"There's nothing to be sad about, everything that is born must die,



everything that die, will give birth to something else."

"Now go prepare everything, there isn't much time."

The three left the room with tears in their eyes. I'm fortunate to have such fine sons and daughters.

The three of them were my first three children, to be exact, I adopted them when I found them in the forest.

25 years ago, I was a part of the **Pent Kingdom** as a [Court Magician], technically, I was more of an [Arcanist]. We were under attack by the larger surrounding kingdoms. They claimed that we were heretics for harbouring demihumans and for going against their so called god. What kind of god discriminate against living, thinking people? It's more likely their excuse for trying to rob us of our [Artifact]s. To prevent our demise, the 7 of us employed «Mass Teleportation» to send as many of the royalties, secrets and citizens to a safe location in the distant **Zrewheig** continent oversea.

The plan was to teleport as many people as possible, since we would be on the verge of death anyways, we planned on using «Self-Destruct» when the enemies manage to reach us. The guards and soldiers were willing to die so that their loved ones and the rest of the kingdom can live on, how can we do any less? Who knew that there was a traitor among us.

Everyone that can had already teleported. The artifacts were the last to be sent. That was when the last defense line was breached and the [Chief Magician] killed one of us with a «Fireball» spell. The remaining 6 of us used spells of our own to finish him off. But the enemy soldiers were seconds away from us. The [Royal Tutor] rushed out toward the soldiers immediately with a «Self-Destruct».

I didn't know what the others were doing at the time, but I was casting spells non-stop, I intended to bring as many enemies to accompany me on my trip to hell. I served this kingdom for over 200 years, my service is not so cheap that a few soldiers can bring me down. I was about to start using {Blood Magic} since my mana has depleted. Before I can start, the [Imperial Historian] shoved a crystal and elixir into my hands and kicked me into the portal. The unstable portal was affecting my mind due to the spatial rifts and fissure, I had my first [Vision] before I eventually blacked out.

When I came to, I was resting in a forest that I didn't recognize. I was sleeping on a roll of cloth and was blanketed with a cloak. This was when I first met Xin and Till, and the first time I learned that Immortals weren't just legends. Xin had thought I was injured and tried to use some [Potions] to help my wound, but they had little effect. It's no wonder, it needed all 7 of the top magicians in the kingdom to cast «Mass Teleportation» and we were still expected to die afterward. I was more amazed that I was alive.

Xin was apologizing since her daughter had searched my body and used the elixir she found on me to treat me. Little Till was probably around 6 to 7 years old at the time. She only aged a little in the last 19 years. I thanked the two before trying to travel in search of my people.

Three days later, a similar scene happened. The same roll of cloth under my head, the same cloak covering me. My life was saved, but apparently I was too weak to travel. I started to think I'm the lone survivor of the kingdom. I had considered killing the two and killing myself just then, to bury everything so no one will know of my existence. For some reason, I relaxed when I realized the little girl from last time was sleeping next to me. The thought of killing them never returned since.

I later found out that I couldn't have killed them anyways.

I slowly roamed the forest for a few weeks, hoping that I could travel soon. The two shared their little shelter with me, weeks turned into months, months turned into years. Xin appeared less and less, but Till still came to visit me quite often. I eventually gave up on travelling and decided to live here peacefully until my death.

I had a [Vision] during those quiet days. In the dreamlike scene, the [Quartermaster] was using his own life essence as mana to seal all the [Artifact]s inside a crystal with the largest [Spatial Storage]. The [Royal Physician] was refining his blood into an [Condensed Life] elixir. That's how I learned how I managed to live so long, and that the crystal contains the secrets of our kingdom. It seems the elixir forcefully compressed my lifespan to combat the side effect of the «Mass Teleportation» spell. There were consecutive explosions after kicking me into the portal, no doubts that they all used «Self-Destruct».

When we were out strolling and foraging one day, Till ran toward something. I eventually caught up to see her trying to calm a crying babe in her small arms. That was how I found De'muel, eventually Mak'ra, Isnic and many others. I expanded the little shelter into a cabin, a cabin into a house. I considered turning it into an orphanage. But how would the kids feel growing up as though they were unwanted in the first place? Instead, I ended up turning it into an Academy. A place where they will learn the needed skills to survive, a place where they will at least have a family.

About 6 years ago, rumours of the mass appearance of Immortals circulated and was later proven to be true. It was around this time that I started to have frequent [Vision]s, and especially the one concerning my own death. I started preparing various formations, leylines and security measures around the academy at this point, it didn't take long

before others started calling this area the [Forest of Illusions]. If fully activated, the forest can probably withstand the assault of a full grown dragon. I hope it would never get to that...

Ah... what 19 years it has been.

Leaning on a table in the room, I place a crystal vase on the table with the storage crystal inside. With the last of my magic, I destroy the table's core without allowing it to fall.

I slowly make my way to the rocking chair Dosnak made for me as a birthday present a year ago. I can only wait now. It is comforting to know that there will still be someone to take care of these children when I'm gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Take good care of each other, okay? There's nothing to be sad about." I give my darling little Till a little pat with my hand. I can no longer see anything nor feel anything anymore. But fate has been good to me. Even though I should be the last survivor of my kingdom, there's still a family there to mourn for me.

*I wonder how he'd look when he finds out I tricked him...*

\* \* \* \* \*

The funeral was a simple affair. The headmistress body was laid to rest on the small hill behind the academy, just beyond the farming fields. A

seed was planted by De'muel on Afina Defaye's chest before burying her remains. The children all had tears in their eyes, but it seems the older ones were given orders on how to keep the academy running in the short term. So everyone was back studying or working within a few days.

"What kind of game have such detailed scenarios...?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The party of four gathers into the main conference room inside the academy, De'muel and Mak'ra were also present.

"That's the best I can get." Reaching into his tunic, Rick takes out a stack of [Pledges].

"The city of **Feia** can subsidize 750 gold a year, and asks us to allow their children to enroll."

"That's it? Didn't we get 600 gold just from that fur trader?" Bell looks at Rick doubtfully.

"I asked the same thing. Apparently, that red pelt was an [Elemental] crafting material. It is actually quite rare to find one of that quality, the fur trader made it big selling it in one of the major cities. For reference, **Feia**'s annual budget is only about 8000 gold. So they are making quite the concession."

"How did your headmistress fund the academy before?" Kun asks the two boys. The two look at each other before looking back at Kun.

"There were these well-dressed people, some of them even wore crowns and tiaras, that comes by every now and then, they paid in

gems for consultations."

"In stacks of gold when she inspects some items."

"She had nobles and royalties as customers? Damn." Kun heads to a chair and looks up at the ceiling.

"Some of the elders did say that they would be paying tuition if they send their kids here."

"How much is the tuition?"

"10 gold if it include food and board."

"25 brats... we can do that. What do you think, Kun?"

"I don't think there's that many elders in all of Feia, and we aren't that well known. What do we even teach?"

De'muel quickly opens one of the drawers and bring out a large stack of books.

"Headmistress said to use these if you guys need help with teaching."

"'Introduction to Magic', 'Art of Farming', 'Of Ploys and Deceits: A Short History of Zrewheig', 'Theory of Mana', hmm... we can probably do this." Kun swing himself into an upright position and goes through the books and manuals one by one.

"There are 2 more drawers full of these in storage, would you like me to take them out?"

"No, no, it's okay, we are just brainstorming right now." Rick reacts as

though he's afraid more books will show up.

"Actually, I have an idea. I will see if it's feasible first."

"We will also need some sort of security and secure the funding for the first year first. We can probably pool our money for it." Bell sighs.

"Actually, the headmistress also left behind 500 gold, just in case." De'muel interjects.

"And we were taught on how to use the defensive formations within the forest." Mak'ra adds right after.

"Looks like we have three years to get everything running then."

"Two years, Rick-ni, two years." The quiet Till finally speaks up.

Rick's face flushes pink and change the subject. "Who would have thought we would be running an academy, high level players would already be happy with a guildhouse."

"Indeed, but if others finds out we are at such a low level, they will likely try and steal it from us. Easy come, easy goes, a treasure is only as good as your strength to keep it." Kun knows this all too well.

"We should thank Rick for his hard work, how many sausages did you have to touch by the way?"

Rick goes from pink to completely red while remaining silent.

"Thank you, Headmaster!" The two boy salutes while shouting.

Rick starts burying his head into the conference table.

"So what should we call the academy?" Bell looks around the room.

After a moment of silence, Till says in a clear voice. "Zinnia Academy, so that we will never forget the headmistress."

Everyone in the room nods in agreement, including the bright red Rick buried in his arms.

"Zinnia Academy it is."



## **First train, then teach, when teaching, be trained**

Mana is present everywhere, it is the very essence of all existence. It can never be created nor destroyed. If that's true, then where it comes from? That is a question that has been asked since at least ten million years ago, and likely even before then. It hasn't been answered yet, or if it had, it was never shared. But we are here for another reason, so lets put that aside that for now.

**Mana consists of four states.**

**Free State** - this is mana in its basic form, it exists everywhere. Its power and concentration is extremely low, so it can't really be used by most people. Sages and Hermits are said to be able to harness this power, but this was never verified. They are reclusive beings, so it's highly unlikely we will ever know.

Moving on.

Ever seen specks of light drifting around in the night sky? Or bursts of them emitting from leylines? That

happens when enough free state mana have gathered together to manifest itself into the Light state.

**Light State** - this is the fundamental state of mana that's used by almost all [Mage]s. In this state, mana can be manipulated with formulas to produce tangible results. The formulas themselves can come in many different shapes and forms, [Mage]s tend to use complex calculations to produce more intense results whereas [Warrior]s use it to boost their physical strength. This is because mana in this state is very fluid and easy to move.

Every living, even some non-living, things produce a certain amount of it in their bodies. How it is used is dependent on the users, it's commonly divided into [Growth], [Skill]s and [Spell]s, although other form of it exists. Refer to other books for a more detailed explanation in regards to them.

**Physical State** - this is the state that we are all aware of. Everything we can touch, see and feel is mana in the physical state. As enough Light State mana gathers together, they will eventually form a physical body. From

the largest to the smallest grains, it's mana in the physical state. Many diseases are the manifestation of malignant physical mana affecting one's body, that's why it's rare to see intermediate and higher [Mages] to become sick.

This also concerns the effect of manipulating Light mana. Take a [Fire Bullet] spell for example. The practitioner will gather the necessary Light mana and run it through a formula to convert it into a flame that will fly forward. It will keep going until the mana is dispersed. The scatter will

either become scattered Light mana or convert into Free mana upon dispersal.

**Ethereal State** - this is the highest state of mana that we, the council of San'na, are aware of. We are not sure not how it's formed, but all living creatures have it. Others also call it the soul. From what we can understand, it's the state when "Thoughts" can occur. The legendary talking sword, the Abysmal Sun, is said to be forged from a combination of Ethereal mana and specially treated ores.

The Ethereal mana is unique to each individual, affecting their aptitudes in handling mana and their capacity to store Light mana. Demihuman souls for example generally has an aptitude for [Growth], Alfin souls generally enhance the host's ability to use [Spells], humans souls are more suited for [Skills]. But regardless of the type of soul, we have determined that the more intelligent and knowledgeable a soul becomes, the more Light mana it can hold.

There is also a cycle of mana, which can be observed by closely observing

nature. Whenever there is rain,

Bell is reading the [Theory of Mana] with interest while Kun is reading [Introduction to Magic]. Till is leading the children, actually, officially now, students, to teach them about [Foraging] in the forest. De'muel and Mak'ra were also on hand to teach everyone about the defenses they can use in the forest.

The group have decided that they will get some sort of lesson plans going first before they can go out and start recruiting students. As such, they were each tasked with selecting a role after one week. Bell has started on going through the more difficult books since she is the older and more knowledgeable of the group. Kun on the other hand focused on the more practical and hands-on subjects. Till wasn't interested in any of the books, calling them boring, so she started teaching the students about the forest. Rick has excused himself from doing anything, saying he has to move during the week.

I put [Theory of Mana] away after reading it in its entirety. The sun shines in through the window, I pace around the window to catch some rays.

*Ahhhhh... if only I can see the sun after logging out. Just have to endure a few more months! But those books... are all of them handwritten? The capacity for Light mana... isn't that referring to our MP? So if one of our students have a large pool, doesn't that mean they are gifted with intelligence? We should run a test for this later. It's intriguing that mana is basically the concept of mass-energy, but does*



*$E=mc^2$  not apply here? The details is amazing for merely a game.*

I continue to think while enjoying the warmth of the sun, suddenly...

“Ah!”

“Huh?”

\*pasha\*

A small blob of water flew into my face as I turned. I didn't have a chance to dodge so I close my eyes on reflex. A small marble of water splashes refreshingly on my face. The amount of water is quite small, I am more surprised than hurt. I open my eyes slowly to see Kun in a weird stance looking unusually dumbfounded.

“Is there any particular reason for throwing water at me?” I can see Rick doing this, but Kun? I thought he was more mature than this, did Rick's stupidity spread that quickly?

Kun drops his stupid pose, looking at his hands and me back and forth a few times with a blank expression.

“I think I just accidentally casted [Water Beads].” He's alternately start turning his hands, clenching and unclenching them.

“But you are a not a mage, how can you cast anything?” The tutorials and game manual were pretty clear, new users are restricted to the four basic class of [Warrior], [Mage], [Archer] and [Craftsman] after they advance from a [Novice]. [Spell]s and [Skill]s are all divided evenly for every basic class, with [Craftsman] being able to use inferior version of them from other classes. This is on top of the fact that there is no “Kun has learned [Water Beads]” notice in the announcement

tab.

“Maybe they did a silent update?” Kun was making an awkward face while scratching his head.

“You know what, just do it again.”

Kun’s face brightens, as though he just found a new toy. He reads from a book on the table while making some strange gestures with his hands and legs, a ball of water floats in the air next to him before flying past me and out the window. Kun turns to follow the flying globe of water with his eyes before it unexpectedly bursts a few meters outside.

“Let me see that.” I walk briskly next to Kun, who quickly got out of the way after looking at me. I stand in front of the book and starts reading it from beginning to end. As I put the book down, slightly elated, slightly confused, but 100% intrigued, I notice Kun starting to shoot multiple beads of water out the window all at once without those weird poses of his. He has a stupidly joyful face while doing it, but I’m not going to tease him for that. I wonder what expression I had when I went to read the book.

I start to do some weird gestures of my own, referring to the [Introduction to Magic] every now and then. I learned why Kun was looking so strange. He was trying to gather the Light mana into a pool while forming the formula in his mind. [Spell]s can be invoked simply by directing Light mana through a formula. The formula can be physically written, mentally constructed or even be abstractly combined to produce the [Spell]. I can feel the Light mana gathering, forming a ball of water in front of me. I finish the formula and thrust my paw out to launch the ball of water.

---

\*zabun\*

Unexpectedly, the ball of water explodes toward the window. Kun was soaked from head to toe, laughing like a little kid. Strange... there was obviously more water from the splash than what was possible from that ball of water.

We got some cloth and wipe down the wet floor, wall and window. The curtains will have to be dried outside. We cleaned with some undoubtedly stupid looking grins on our faces. I haven't felt this excited since doing those science experiments back in grade school. It's probably the same for Kun as well.

\*\*\*\*\*

The week passed. The magic discovery was shown to Till and eventually Rick. Till already knew about it apparently, she just likes to shout out the spell name since she says that's how heroes attack, at least that's what the headmistress had told her. Rick was completely soaked when Bell demonstrated for him. He was eager to learn it until he realized he would need to read a book and so declined to do so.

"So we will go with this plan then?"

"Why do I have all the crappy jobs?"

"You were never here when we were deciding, beggars can't be choosers. The [Art of Farming] and [Mining Techniques] mainly has pictures, so it's right up your alley."

"But why Phy. Ed and PR as well?"

"Because your body is the only good thing you have, unless you want

to switch with one of us.”

Bell starts holding up some thick books laid out on the conference table.

“Fine fine...” Rick back off right away after seeing the books.

After some fine tuning, the group makes a rough schedule to follow. Bell will be responsible for theories and concepts, Kun will look after practicality and application. Till is in charge of teaching things related to the forest and oversee funding administration done by De'muel and co. Rick's main focus will be teaching the students how to farm, mine, train their body, and when necessary, deal with outsiders. Additionally, each of them will teach the students how to fight with whatever they are good at. They will adventure and travel around together when they happen to log in at the same time. Hunting and leveling will of course be allowed, as long as one lesson is done every week.

Zinnia Academy now have 4 new principals/teachers. Lessons are in place, they find that the more they teach the students, the better they get with their own skills. They may be low level users, but they are growing rapidly alongside their students.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to them, the [Monochrome Blades] and [Dawn's Moonlight] guilds started to wage war for the rights to [Barghost Dungeon] which lies to the west, just slightly beyond **Sardon**. No one has cleared the dungeon yet, but several [Raid]s have already managed to reach the [Lord of the Dungeon], so it's just a matter of time before it's defeated.

# Blessing in Disguise

In a workshop, next to the farming fields beyond the main academy building. A bull-horned young man, a deer-horned young man and a harpy-like young lady surrounds a big, translucent, jelly-like humanoid, who's staring at the item between them nervously.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" The translucent figure look at his three seniors timidly.

De'muel looks at the deer-horned Mak'ra and the feathered Isníc before nodding. "I think this is what the headmistress would've wanted, Dosnak."

The jelly figure shakes for a moment, as though something has tapped a soft jello. "But I've never worked on something like this before."

"You can do it, there's no one else here that can even come close to you."

"We believe in it you."

"Stop underestimating yourself, Dosnak."

Dosnak reach for the crystal laying on the table before him, hesitantly.

\*pecho\*

Holding it in his hands, he focus on feeling the different surfaces, angles, sharpness, and so forth of the crystal.

"Okay, leave me alone for a few days, cover for me if there's a lesson."

"Of course, let us know if you need anything."

The three oldest of the students leaves the workshop, leaving Dosnak alone as he starts picking out a piece of wood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Of the 4.5 billion people on the planet, about one sixth of them have joined "Second Phantasia" since its launch 2 years ago. Claiming to be the first Total Immersion Entertainment System since humanity's revival, it boasts unsurpassed realism for all the senses. Its popularity was initially due to the console itself being an intuitively usable computer with a price comparable to a mid-high end personal computer. The userbase truly exploded 3 months after its launch, when users learned that they were able to communicate with each other in the [Common Tongue] regardless of what language they speak. People that would never be able to meet or communicate with each other all of the sudden discovered they can talk to anyone, anywhere on the planet. On top of that, the realism, freshness, novelty and the lack of a rival, "Second Phantasia" became the hottest product on the planet.

The system starts all users in the **Zrewheig** continent on the planet **Amoaltz**. The planet has a 14 hour day cycle, with 6 days making up a week, and 212 days making up a year. There is no time differential, one minute passing on **Earth** is the same as a minute passing on **Amoaltz**, allowing a total sense of immersion, as if they are really in another world.

It has been a month since the group had laid out their plans for the academy and just slightly under 8 weeks since Bell, Kun and Rick joined "Second Phantasia". They had been able to provide at least 4

lessons individually with joint lessons in between. Bell spent most of her free time going through the first batch of books, almost obsessively, especially on books that focuses on magic. She occasionally discuss her thoughts and idea with Kun and some of the more curious students. Kun has immersed himself with learning magic, putting up small shows for the students every time he discovered something new. Bell occasionally drop by and show off her own discovery as well. Kun often gets the feeling that he would be eaten if he didn't share his discoveries.

Rick somehow ended up as the "Big Brother" of the academy, with all the younger students vying to play with him whenever they have free time. Maybe it was due to the influence of the children, Sammy have also decided to join in the fun, occasionally putting Rick completely in its cheeks. His title as "Headmaster" may in fact be in name only.

As for Till, she has been teaching the students, but her mood haven't been the same since the death of the headmistress. The students that look at her as an older sister also became a little gloomy; they are all sad about the headmistress' passing. As far as they could remember, their big sis and the headmistress were always together.

Overall, they have all leveled quite a bit thanks to the various excursions into the forest, with or without the students.

Today, the four of them have all logged in at the same time.

"Hmm... let's go fight something tougher, rabbits and boars are good and all, but they are too easy now." Rick is balancing a round red fruit on his nose while commenting.

"Alright, let's go! I never had grilled anaconda meat before!"

"... Am I going to end up cooking again?"

"Who else but you?" Rick flicks his head up as he was about to lose balance of the fruit, biting it as it comes down from the air.

Till has been mostly quiet, just nodding at the appropriate time. And so they head out of the [Forest of Illusions] for the first time since officially starting the academy.

\* \* \* \* \*

"«Gust»! Hurry Sammy!"

"Wait up, Till!"

"What has gotten into her all of the sudden? Did she spot a hot guy or something?"

\*kon\*

"No idea, but I'm not going to leave her alone, you guys catch up. «Pump Up»!"

Bell's legs thicken slightly before she starts running off.

\* \* \* \* \*

A youth in a dull brown uniform lies facedown on the ground, there's hoof prints leading away into the forest, off from the path. Like a gust of wind, a pale little girl riding a white furry blob appears next to him.



Patting the albino beast, it flattens itself, letting the girl down.

The girl goes up to the figure and turn him over.

"A Sardonian messenger?" Reaching down, she place her fingers on his neck. "Good, he's still alive."

There's two figures riding towards her from the distance, a bright red demonhead hanging above their heads. The girl's eye narrows, expressing a silent fury. "Villains."

[Villain]s are users that have killed non-users recently, they are identified by a red demonhead hanging over their head. Unlike [Murderer]s who get a red sword for killing users, [Villain]s are synonymous with bandits, raiders and warmongers. Any users that kill either a [Villain] or a [Murderer] will not receive a [Murderer] symbol.

"Groundwind east southeast, leafwind east, crosswind northnorth-east..." The girl starts mumbling to herself for a while as they draws near.

"Hey, there's a little girl over there."

"Who cares? Just kill her."

The two riders readies their scimitars as they approach ever closer to the girl.

"«Wind Spiral»!" The pale, light blue-haired girl claps her hand together before thrusting them toward the riders. A sudden gust, or more accurately, a lance, of wind slams into the two users, sending them to the ground.

"Watch it, girlie, don't you know who we are?"

"Shut up. «Rising Tempest»!" The girl lifts her left hand up, staring down at the [Villain] who spoke. Leaves and loose dirt at his feet starts to stir, rising in the air.

"Hey.. hey... help me down!" The [Villain] asks his friend for help before he starts flying upward into the air.

"You asked for it!" The second [Villain] ignores his friend and licks his blade.

The lone man with the scimitar crouch down "«Backstab»!" and vanish from view.

A moment later, he appears behind the girl, slashing down with his scimitar.

"«Burst»!" As though expecting him, the girl swings her left hand down and release a wall of air going away from her in all direction. The man flies away for several meters before he can finish swinging his scimitar down.

"Till!" A red blur suddenly appears from the forest. The angry looking felinoid with buffed legs look at the girl, to the scimitar wielding man on the floor, the red demonhead symbol, back to Till, then finally focusing the man completely, unfastening the mithril halberd on her back.

"\*Bleep\*, another one. «Serpent Strike»!"

The man gives a sneer before diving toward Till. Before she can react, Bell was already attacking the man. "«Elemental Blade - Metal»!" A large shining mass of dull silver light flies toward the man, who stops his attack to block it with his scimitar. The blade shatters, but the man tumbles in the air before landing on his feet, drawing a dagger as he does so.

"Are you okay?" Standing between Till and the unknown man, Bell readies herself in a wide stance. Till merely gives a curt nod. "Okay, sit tight, I'm going to finish off this bastard."

Bell suddenly dash toward the dagger wielding man, who reacted by throwing the dagger at her. "Ha!" Bell collapse her halberd and throws it like a tomahawk.

\*gakin\*

The two weapon collides, with the dagger flying harmlessly to the side. The man easily dodge the spinning halberd, his eyes opening wide as he watch it splits the tree behind him.

"«Air Hammer»!"

\*bata\*

Till assists by slamming a spell into the man's head.

\*koki koki\*

Bell's entire body gives off some cracks and pops. The man can only gulp.

"«Metal Claw»! «Elemental Dance»!" A liquid light covers her paws before revealing sharp, metal claws replacing her normal ones. She release thrusts, kicks, elbows, knees relentlessly in successive order.

\*baki baki gokin boro boro\*

All of the strikes lands cleanly on the man, his armours and bones cracks and breaks, his clothing in tatters, cuts covering his entire body.

---

His armour eventually ended up scattering all over the place. The scene continues, with the occasional cry of pain interrupting the symphony of striking sounds.

Bell kept striking until the man fades away, leaving a pulsating crystal and some potions behind.  
She grabs the loot and turn toward Till.

"Let's head back for now."

# It's never too late for revenge

*Ouch... wait, I'm alive? How did I get here?*

I, Mikhal Donavic, was sent from the **Sardon War Council** as part of a group of 3 to request aid from **Feia**. Even though they can't even be call a city-state, their guards have the most combat experience among our allies since they frequently deal with wild beasts out in the frontier. I wouldn't be ashamed to say that we wouldn't be able to take over the town without losing the majority of our force.

The war among the Immortals have escalated to the point that they started taking over [Keep]s and [Fort]s in **Sardon Kingdom's** western border without the kingdom's consent. Their fight for ownership of the wilderness there have spread and it seems they hold little regards to the lives of Sardonians. Since the emergence of immortals 6 years ago, [Dungeon]s that were deemed impassable have been successfully cleared. According to rumours, there has been only 2 low level [Dungeon]s that were cleared by the immortals. But the treasures from the [Rabbit's Den] and [Arachnid Hell], with their subsequent harvests, sent immortals and royalties alike in the northern part of the continent into a frenzy. It seems we are cursed with one near our borders.

I was on my way from the capital, **Ashentor**, before getting chased by two Immortal raiders, my seniors had likely perished holding off those immortals. I must have taken the wrong turn at the crossroads while escaping and fainted from my wounds.

"NYAAAAA!"

"God damn it Bell! Take it easy on me!"

I sit up from the bed I'm on and look out the window.

"«Elemental Dance»! «Surge»!"

\*buo dohyu dohyu buwasha-\*

A fiery looking cat monster seems to be attacking a young hunter. It swings continuously with a long wooden staff before... faint images of flame, ice, wind, metal and earth tinged by a red aura appears each time the hunter dodge the strikes by a hair's breath. That's until the cat monster... sprayed a wall of water? I pinch my cheek and rub my eyes. Aren't red cat monsters supposed to use fire? Has the world's logic left me? Or did I lose my mind when I fell off my horse?

"And this is an example of 'the best defense is a good offense', all of you know how fast and quickly Rick-sensei can dodge, especially when Bell-sensei goes to knock on his head, right?"

A chorus of laughter follows... are there children here? A young looking minotaur hands a towel to the soaked hunter. I pinch myself again. Aren't minotaurs sought after as guards for nobles? I heard some countries even forcefully enslave them by holding their family hostage. My cheek is still hurting, so I can't be dreaming.

"Had that been a fire-based attack instead, Rick-sensei would be treating us to a BBQ right about now."

Another chorus of laughter fills the air as the hunter wipes himself down.

"Since Rick-sensei can evade Bell-sensei's strikes easily, she has to

attack continuously to force him to keep reacting and then surprise him with an wide-area attack. Had she backed off, what would have happened?

Isn't that too reckless? It is completely different from what was taught in the [Barracks]. I can't see the figure, so I decides to move toward the window. There's a dull pain in my right shoulder, oh right... I was cut there by a scimitar, wasn't I? It has been properly bandaged, so it seems like I was treated for the wound.

"Rick-sensei would have kept shooting from a distance and wear her down."

A youthful, high pitched voice replies, it looks like the young pointed ear child --is that a light alf?-- was the one who gave the answer. Now that I look closely, there is about two dozen or so children and youths sitting in a group. All are demihumans of some sorts, it would fill a lower nobleman with jealousy... or a slave-merchant with glee.

"Correct! When you are fighting an enemy capable of long range attack, either run away or keep closing on them without letting up. Always make sure that you either have an advantage or the enemy has a disadvantage, it's okay to run away if you can't win. Remember, if you die, that's it, if you live, you can always fight again another day."

"Oooooohhh!" All the children replies with gusto.

"Why don't you spar with Bell for once instead of just talking all the time?" The one that seems to be Rick-sensei says it in good humour, there's a little smile on his face.

The fiery looking cat monster is actually a woman, her body has shrunk a bit. She turns toward the one doing the instructing, a short-haired young man, and gives a shrug.

The man seems to reply in the same way. He's an average looking man, he looks even weaker than the young hunter, there's no way he can win.

Strangely enough, all the children sat straight and look at the two attentively. The two space themselves apart before the hunter walks between them with the towel he was using. The catwoman is still using a long staff. The short-haired man seems to be using a wooden shortsword and baton, with the shortsword leading in front in his left hand.

"Ready? Start!" The hunter swings the towel down and backs away.

Strange, the catwoman isn't rushing this time, but slowly circles the man. Whenever the man starts to approach, she would thrust or swing her staff, keeping him at bay. The man occasionally have to block the staff with both weapons when he can't evade fast enough. Even then, it looks like he would be flying off his feet at any moment.

"«Backslide»! «Stardust»!"

The man slides backward as though he's gliding and then a dense cloud of firefly-like specks of light surrounds his shortsword.

"Trying to go long range? I won't let you! RRAA! «Pump Up»! «Elemental Dance»!"

The catwoman seems to increase in size, the same way she looked when she sprayed that wall of water at the young hunter. She rushes up in front of the man while spinning her staff within a blink of an eye. It seems like it's the man's loss.

Unexpectedly, the man managed a quick cross block with both of his weapons before pushing it down to his right. The shortsword glides



along the staff, heading straight for the catwoman's leading hand. She was quick to notice, dropping her left hand, going with the force of the parry, the fiery cat-like thing swung left, whipping her right leg right at the man's head with a roundhouse. Which he back off away from immediately, slightly before his sword can reach her.

The cloud of light on the man's sword is mostly gone now, whatever plan he had wouldn't likely to succeed now. Their distance is merely a few step away. I expect the fight to end soon.

"«Nya nya nya nya nya, NYAA»(Elemental Blade - Water)! "

Five blades of water flies toward the man in quick succession from her staff before dashing after them. It looks like she is intending to finish the man off... but... did... did the man just smirked?

The man unexpectedly dashes towards the blades of water, is he insane?

"«Starrise»!"

A cloudburst of light suddenly emits from the catwoman's staff, briefly blinding her which causes her to block the light with a paw. The blades of water sudden slows down and even seems to be heading backward toward her.

"«NNNNYYYYYAAAAA»(Elemental Blade - Chorus Strike)!!"

She reacts extremely quickly and swings the staff in an overhand strike , absorbing the blades of water and the cloud of dazzling light almost completely and sends an even larger blade of water forward. The man had already sidestepped to her right when she was blinded, so her strike is meaningless. The man swings his sword, stops suddenly, then

gently place his sword on the catwoman's neck. The large blade of water bursts in the distance behind him.

"Holy shit..."

"WWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

The young hunter have a funny looking expression as though his mouth has become a cavern. The children cheers while the catwoman shrinks down a little in size before falling flat on her back, completely outstretched, giving off a hearty laughter. The man withdraws his sword and baton, smiling.

"Why is she... laughing after getting defeated? What's with those attacks? These are... monsters... all of them are monsters..."

"Monsters? Where?" Asks a voice next to me.

"EEK!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin seeing the pale, translucent blue-haired, expressionless little girl standing next to me.

\* \* \* \* \*

"He claims to be a Sardonian messenger on his way to Feia and was attacked by some users during his journey. Should we believe him?"

Till nods at Rick, "his uniform is definitely from the Sardonian Intelligence corps, and it was true that he was attacked."

"I only saw one attacker though," Bell says with a frown.

"I already blew one away before you got there."

The group turns toward the girl, at the unexpected report, as well as her cold tone of voice.

"Let's ask why he's heading to Feia." Kun breaks the awkward silence.

The group is chatting in a chatroom with De'muel and Mak'ra listening in. The confused looking blonde boy with blue eyes look around the conference room with curiosity as they continue their discussion. The chatroom feature of the users allowed invited people to chat within a secure bubble where sound will be prevented from leaking out, the range is somewhat limited though.

Walking out of the confine of the chatroom, Rick orders the messenger into the chatroom. "Get in here, boy, we need ask you some things."

The blonde boy stares at Rick with a frown, "I'm no boy, I have already been granted the adult name of Mikhal." It's common practice for the people of Zrewheig, at least for the humans, to have a childhood name and an adult name when they reach the age of 13. When one gets an adult name, it's expected that they will act like an adult, and be received as such.

"Until you have some facial hair or some hair down there, you are going to be a boy to me, now get your ass in there before I kick it in for you." Rick had helped Bell in treating his wounds, so he actually know that for a fact.

Mikhal's face turns red, from a mixture of shame, anger, humiliation and angst. He reluctantly walk toward the center table in the conference room. The youth in front of him was able to mostly dodge that

monster's attack, he figured it wouldn't be wise to agitate him. Especially since it seems like they saved his life.

"... do it this way."

The boy is surprised when he approached the table, he couldn't hear anything when he was sitting on the sofa. But there seems to be a full blown discussion going on.

"Have a seat... What should we call you?"

"Mikhal is fine."

"Okay, have a seat, Mikhal." Kun is doing most of the talking since he appears to be the most average of everyone there.

\*gacha\*

"Tea?" Mak'ra offers a cup as Mikhal sits down on a chair.

He gingerly take the cup as he stares at the small antlers on top of the demihuman's head.

\*buu\*

Kun gives a cough to draws the staring boy's attention.

"Now Mikhal, why were you being attacked by Dawn's Moonlight?"

"They were from Dawn's Moonlight? That would certainly explain it." The boy absentmindedly sip a little of the tea, the intensely sharp and refreshing flavour causes him to snap his head up. He slowly take another sip before realizing the expectant look from everyone in the

room, waiting for him to continue.

"As everyone know, the immortal guilds of Dawn's Moonlight and the Monochrome Blades are vying for supremacy in the Field of Ashes. The Sardon kingdom had suffered indignation after indignation. We were sent to gather help from our allies and neighbours to push those two immortal guilds out of our territories."

Bell, Kun and Rick all look at each other meaningfully.

"They are at war?"

"When did this happen?"

"..."

"What...?"

The group bombards Mikhal for the next hour or so with questions after questions, squeezing every bit of outside news they can. In return, the boy also asks questions of his own. Although they have kept somewhat updated with the internet forums and newsgroups, exact details are hard to determine since one would need to be a member of a given guild to gain access to some of the more sensitive information.

The news they've gathered are general news that the average user would know. But they did managed to learn that other [Novice]s and the basic [Class]es aside from [Mage] don't have the option to learn {Magic}, at least there are no mentions of it. As a matter of fact, there's no mention of anything about mana aside from MP, INT's and WIS' affect on it, and the various spells that [Mage]s and their advanced version can use. So this mean they have discovered a secret among secrets for mana in general.

They had developed their own [Skill]s by combining their knowledge

and understanding of the books left by the headmistress before testing it in the forest. «Elemental Dance» for example was based on the «Elemental Blade» series of attack from the advanced [Warrior] class of [Elemental Blademaster]. This class is able to add Metal, Wood, Water, Fire or Earth attributes to their attacks. But instead of continuously using MP to produce a new effect for each strike, «Elemental Dance» uses the residual mana and aftereffects from the previous strike to produce the next element's effect. When used successively in a combo, the mana cost is reduced significantly while dealing massive damage. This is because there's nothing recorded out there with complete elemental resistance, additionally, each element can cause certain status effects upon a successful strike.

Aside from just [Skill], there's also [Growth] and [Magic]. Till had focused almost exclusively on [Magic], while Bell was able to learn how to use [Growth] alongside [Skill], and Kun dabbled in all three. Rick, seeing all the shiny new toys everyone else got, decided to learn as well, he's further behind than everyone else, but at least he's able to enchant his arrows before firing them. They intend to act as though they are advanced class users with hidden classes when they go out of the [Forest of Illusions]. Bell the [Elemental Warrior], Kun the [Master Appraiser], Rick the [Trickster] and Till the [Storm Mage].

With the safeguards in place, they intended to venture out to recruit some new students. That was the plan anyways, until the sudden rescue they had to perform for Mikhal. This, however, is an unexpected gift, for both parties.

Having a non-user with some first hand experience of the situation would prove extremely useful. For one, users tends to ignore non-users since they are NPCs according to the system's manual. Aside from quests and buying/selling, they serve little to no purpose. As such, they are ignored completely unless users wants something from

them. So their information can be extremely reliable.

On the other hand, having other immortals sharing ideas and thoughts from their perspective may very well reduce casualties on **Sardon's** side. So the exchange of information was rapid, detailed and concise. Which also leads to more tea... that Mikhal downs faster than Mak'ra can brew.

The end result was, Mikhal can go request help from **Feia** once he's healthy enough to travel. Since his horse is likely dead in the forest, one will be provided to him. In exchange, he has to make a {Blood Oath} that will keep him silent about finding the academy until one of the four has deemed enough time has passed.

This way, Mikhal can complete his mission. The group on the other hand will be able to make a plan to bring [Monochrome Blades] down, and if possible, [Dawn's Moonlight] as well. The first guild took advantage of Bell, Kun and Rick. They still shudder at the thought of logging into their own dissection. The latter guild started the fight with them.

They would have ignored [Dawn's Moonlight], but its guildmember had attacked Till. The armour fragments that Bell brought back had radiant moon emblems on some of its parts. There were high-grade guild-tier [Berserker Potion]s and [Healing Potion]s as well, if Bell hadn't killed the raider in one go, he might have used those potions to turn the table on her.

The group, along with the De'muel and Mak'ra, continues their planning while Mikhal returns to the infirmary to recuperate, with a pot of tea of course.

# Incognito as Shadow

The group has created, scrapped, revised, created some more, scrapped some more, revised some more plans until Rick had to log off. Out of all the plans, there's a very simple and devious one that can greatly benefit them. Make the two guilds fight to the death and then gain credit for it among the non-users. There are some risks involved, but considering the current situation, even if they were to get caught, there will still be bigger fish to fry than for the two guilds to go after them. Not that they can even if they want to, since the group is relatively unknown save for **Feia**. The ones in the most dangerous position would be Bell and Till, but surprisingly, it was Till who made the final suggestion.

Mikhal's departure will be delayed until Rick logs back in, when Mikhal's fit to travel of course. This way, Rick can throw the support of the Academy behind Sardon as part of Feia without anyone being the wiser. This will also save them from having to give Mikhal a mount since they will be riding Sammy together.

Kun will be in charge of the academy in the mean time, and go over the 2nd batch of books that Defaye left them. While he might not be the best at understanding high concepts, he's exceptionally good at grasping what can be used and more importantly, in what ways something can be used. He's also to provide personal training to the older students, so that they can watch over the academy in the future should the entire group be absent for any extended period of time.

Till and Bell will masquerade as envoys that are sent to assist Sardon. Till will seek an audience with the king, she recalls the king of **Sardon** had previously consulted with Alfina, it's likely the King or some of his



entourage will recognize Till. Bell is to be the escort, and also the intimidation factor should something go awry.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the dimly lit corner of the workshop, an untouched tray of food lays on the far end of a workbench. The surrounding table space is filled with sawdust and half shells made of wood. An aqueous humanoid throws another wooden shell haplessly onto the table, unsatisfied. Grabbing another piece of wood, Dosnak starts carving again.

Dosnak is what one would call a humanoid slime, often mistaken for slime beasts, Humans tend to attack them when they are encountered in the shades and burrows of forests and swamps, thus the species as a whole has few individuals and is normally very hostile to humans. Since he was rescued by Defaye and Till when he was young, he harbours no such feelings common among his species.

His species as a whole is weak to fire, thus is uncomfortable in the sunlight. Since he can't help farm nor patrol during the day, he had been restricted to hunting at night and staying indoors or in the shades after joining De'muel, Mak'ra and Isníc. During one depressing, bright afternoon, Till brought back a clay toy to cheer him up. This eventually led to him picking up crafting as a hobby, then it became a calling.

The entirety of his body save his core is aqueous, often in the consistency of a jelly. He can change his body shape at will, so he can be very sensitive to the shapes and texture of anything he touches. As such, he makes some very comfortable furniture and clothing since he can imitate the shape of those that will use it. As a matter of fact, a large

majority of the furniture in the academy had been built by him. Various curtains, upholstery, towels, clothings and so forth were made by him as well. Even so, this is the hardest project he've faced so far.

Haphazardly throwing another hollowed, wooden shell on the table, he picks out another piece of wood and starts carving again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Be careful out there, Rick-ni. Keep an eye on him, Sammy."

\*kero kero\*

"We will be back before you know it, and what did you mean by telling Sammy to keep an eye on me... hey, wait, no, Sammy, nooo!" Sammy picks Rick up with his normally hidden mouth and stuffs him into its cheeks. Riding on top of it, is Mikhal. With nary a notice, the furry white blob storms off onto the road leading out of the forest. Leaving Till behind, who is giving them a small wave.

Both Bell and Kun are busy with their respective work. With August approaching, Bell is busy checking both equipments and personnels to ensure they are fit to work in the upcoming summer work season, and to get replacements if needed. Kun on the other hand is busy running training camps for assorted groups of people, the funds earned will make the upcoming winter easier and more manageable. This leaves Rick and Till, who are on summer break to log in and implement part of their plan. Since the audience with the King would require Bell to be present, Till decided to temporarily take over Kun's duties while he works.

"Till-ne, come with us, we need to have a talk."

De'muel had hit his growth period, he had went from just slightly taller than Till to almost as tall as Rick now if you include his horns. Mak'ra and Isnic, who are also starting to show signs of growth, are further back behind De'muel, waiting patiently.

"Why? What's the matter?"

"We will discuss it at the workshop, come."

\*katakata\*

The four of them head to the workshop under the bright morning sun.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Go ahead, Dosnak."

We had gathered at the front of the workshop, a gentle breeze blows in from the opened doors and windows.

\*pecho\*

Picking something from the table, the jellyman grabs my right hand and hands it to me. It's a necklace with an intricate amulet of a blooming flower the size of a medallion, as though one has been plucked while in bloom and then instantly fossilized. At the very center of the flower, a shimmering crystal lays firmly embedded in it. The crystal and wooden carving looks to be one continuous piece with no visible lines to show how they were put together. I recognize this crystal

anywhere, it's the one that Aflina always keep with her.

"Please cheer up... headmistress wouldn't have wanted to see you like this."

\*poro poro\*

I just stare at the amulet, my vision becomes slightly blurry and something warm seems to be coming out of my eyes. A pair of feathery arm wraps me in a hug from behind. "Everything's going to be okay, just let it out."

\*beso\*

Something like a dam inside of me bursts, why am I crying? A bitter-sweet pain fills my chest, why am I remembering Alfina all of the sudden? I turn and sob into the figure behind me. The warmth feels really comforting...

Till had been grieving the loss of an old dear friend without being aware of it. It can be easily forgiven if one considers her tender age of 12. She had been sickly as a child, as such, her mother had often bring her to work and play with her in her lab while working. She eventually grew out of her frail constitution, but not before befriending those beings in the machine world that her mom had shown her in her laboratory.

To keep using the consoles at her mom's lab, she was made to promise to score well in her report cards. It was an unreasonable promise intended to keep her from visiting often, but unexpectedly, she had no problem keeping up, even surpassing her mother's expectation.

Unbeknownst to her mother, she had been reading books to keep her

mind off her illness when she was young. She had been unable to play and interact with other children as far back as she can remember, so she had to managed on her own. The username Till, is based on a geology book she had found from her mother's study during this period of her loneliness, referring to the left behind sediment from a glacier, because that's how she'd felt, left behind.

Due to her awkwardness, intelligence and timid attractiveness, she was bullied when she fully returned to school. Her peers, who were jealous of her looks, intelligence, attention, etc., made her life miserable, stealing, taunting, even physically attacking her. Her teachers weren't much better, throwing unreasonable expectations on her while blaming her when she was the obvious victim of various incidents. Realizing the shallowness of those around her, she chose to close her heart and mercilessly fought back against those who continued to wrong her.

Children her age that continued to bother her would have rumours spread about them, sometimes with their electronic diaries, journals and even embarrassing photos posted anonymously on the school's intranet board, at times, even onto the greater internet. Her teachers who were incompetent or malicious were either fired or arrested for a variety of reasons. Eventually, she was even able to gain exemption from attending school altogether aside from the designated time where she would need to take various tests.

The principal and guidance counselors tried to convince her to apply for the national prodigy recognition exam, but she had deemed that it would merely improve the school's reputation and their career's future prospects. As such, she flatly refused, she even threatened to withdraw from the school and get the media involved when they tried to strong-arm her into taking the exam.

It's simple irony that it was non-humans that had kept her humanity from slipping away. She had intended to scare the three users that were rescued by Alfina away by telling them about the planned dissection. She knew Alfina was merely joking, but dissecting these shallow, two-faced creatures didn't seem to be too bad of an idea to her.

She had expected them to log out and never to return again, but unexpectedly, they did log back in. The three of them even helped each other, it's obvious the short black-haired man was different from the other two and didn't really know them. Why would they help each other? How can they laugh and work together like this?

Sensing the subtle change in her presence, Alfina sent her out traveling with them. She cheerfully went along with it, what better way to view a drama of greed and betrayal than a front row seat?

But nothing changed, not when Bell reached level 1 and started to grow hair all over the place and ended up as part cat. Not when Rick had to find a needle in a haystack and the two went and helped him for his [Archer] test. Not even when Kun was picked up by a stray Roc, the two had jumped right into rescuing him before running like mad for cover. They treat others with sincerity, talk about their daily, mundane things, joke around as if it was the most natural thing to them.

That was when she learned that not all people are trash, she was going to share this with Alfina when she got back, but she never had the chance.

*Hmm... comfy... wait, why am I in bed? I remember getting the amulet and then...*

\*gishi\*

I couldn't recall much after that. Giving up, I open my eyes and sit up, looking around. I see Isníc's distinct feathers wrapped around me, with her gently snoring away. The sun is streaming from the windows, Dosnak seems to be sleeping in a wide shallow tub. De'muel and Mak'ra are nowhere to be seen. I got up slowly to avoid waking either of the two up and walked outside the room. It seems I was sleeping in Dosnak's bedroom... did I cry myself to sleep?

On the long workbench in front of me, there are many small, semi-circle hollowed shells that were almost exactly half the size of her amulet. I look at the amulet hanging down my neck.

Just how many times did he carve to make the crystal fit in so perfectly?

I gathered them and placed them into a crate and quietly cleaned up the place before sweeping the sawdust with «Burst». I don't know why, but I feel a lot lighter, and I think, a little hungry. Am I hungry in here? Or in my real body? I went back into Dosnak's room, close the windows before heading to my room in the dormitory and log out. There's going to be a slight change of plans.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*hyuu\*

The wind howls wildly in the night sky. It is an unexpectedly chilly night. The weather in Sardon is usually mild to warm in all seasons due to its unique geography, but unusually strong winds and foul weather visits the gray hills of **Ashentor** this night.

"Good night, my liege."

"Hmph."

A figure clad in a royal purple cloak waves off a troop of guards and servants. It climbs onto a large, satin covered bed with a canopy after throwing the cloak haphazardly on the floor, reaching over to blow out the candle lamp.

\*gishi\*

As soon as he rests himself into the bed, a voice greets him.

"Good evening, King Einwil of Ashentor. And don't scream for your guards, you know you would already be dead if we wanted to kill you."

He sits up from the bed, noticing the pair of golden eyes that's staring at him from next to the window.

"We?"

\*gaba gaba\*

A flutter of the other curtains and the rubbing of clothing answers his question.

"It has come to our attention that you need assistance against some immortals."

The king narrows his eyes, trying to locate the rest of the "we". "Any peasant with an ear knows that."

"Ah, but would any peasant help you deal with them?"



The king remains silent for a moment. "Elaborate."

"We are going to send some help."

"And if I refuse this 'help'?"

"We will just make sure Mikhal doesn't arrive in Feia. You know they are the only ones that will send help of any significance, your other so called allies and neighbours will merely offer some token support. No one wants to agitate the immortals after all."

The king himself expects as much as well, and he had also sent Mikhal and his two brothers to **Feia** personally. The two older sons of the obese Barwn Donavic are mostly more brawn than brains, but the illegitimate son has proven himself to be quite excellent. The king also knows that no help comes free... or cheap. "What is the cost of this... 'help'?"

\*hiso hiso\*

"Two items from the treasury, and all the layouts and maps of the forts and keeps the immortals had taken over and those surrounding them... and a favor."

"Two items?"

\*hiso hiso\*

"Fine, 1 item, but 5 from the royal forge."

The king is dumbfounded, unsure of the purpose behind the low price for the offered help.

He reaches over to the candle lamp in a smooth motion to avoid drawing notice to it.

\*bo\*

"«Flame»." The king managed to light the candle lamp.

"Remember, maps, an item from the treasury and five from the forge. Just give the maps to the Feian force, it will come to us eventually."

The king turns around and points the light toward the pair of golden eyes. But they are already gone, a flutter of feathers and a trail of aquamarine exits the window. The king immediately runs toward it, trying to spot the people that were once in his room.

\*gaba gaba hyuu\*

But all he sees are his guards patrolling the ramparts, with nary a commotion.

\*gobaa\*

In the sky high above the royal castle, a shivering Till holds onto Isníc tightly while breathing out clouds of white. "Good acting there, Isníc... Buurrrrrrrrr, next time I'm going to bring a coat." The two figures glide silently toward the [Forest of Illusions].

# Killing two birds with one stone

*Formulas are limited to physical, mental and abstract forms. So the source always has to go through the user. In theory, we can probably make an ultimate skill if we can somehow make the spell reactionary and control it instead.*

To be honest, I was scared, scared and excited the day after getting splashed with his [Water Beads]. I couldn't sleep that night and woke up to figure out the formulas. I spent many sleepless nights trying to decipher the formulas, especially since there is no information whatsoever on "Second Phantasia" related sites or even on the internet at large. Then one day, Kun said he figured how to make new skills. His method was very simple, he just divided them into large chunks and just moved them around. So in short, he's treating the formula like an algebra equation and just throw in known values into the working parts. I guess this is what they call unable to see the forest for the trees.

In his explanation, the [Source] section determines the amount of mana used from the caster, then you have the [Conversion] sequence to convert the Light mana source into the desired state. Lastly, the [Action] sequence to determine how the converted mana should act. A normal spell consist of [Source] + [Conversion] + [Action] = [Effect].

The more complex the [Conversion] and [Action], the more mana you'd need, thus requiring a larger [Source]. The larger the [Source], the more mana you'd need to move, thus needing even more mana, inflating the [Source] even more. My «Chorus Strike» used that fundamental rule to boost its attack power. It consists of two formulas, the first one uses a considerable amount of mana to deconstruct incoming

modified mana into Light mana. The second one can be any formula that requires a large quantity of mana since it will be using the pre-constructed Light mana produced from the first one. This way, I can convert incoming attacks into a bigger attack of my own at a fraction of the cost. I already thought it was ingenious, but then... «Starrise»!!

Instead of going for more power, he went for efficiency! The first version of «Stardust» he showed me was a continuous attack using «Light Spear» and «Homing Bullets» as basis. He used the [Source] and [Conversion] part of «Light Spear» and then repeated the [Action] part of «Homing Bullets» tens of times while reducing the radius. The result was a continuous speck of lights that chases you and blind you on every impact. Since it's low cost and long duration, a more powerful second [Spell] can be used to finish off the opponent while they are blinded.

I thought that was what he was going to do when he used it during our spar, but no... it went completely beyond my expectation! I thought he intended to bombard me with many specks of light in one decisive volley when he summoned that cloud of lights. Who would have thought that it was a delayed spell? I was ecstatic, I got to see something new that others have never seen before! I spent even more sleepless trying to figure how he did it, I tried rewriting numerous formulas to imitate its effect, but I couldn't do it! I eventually gave up and wrung it out of Kun.

It seems Kun used two formulas of his own. The first «Stardust» was to produce a mana source for the second formula, the only purpose was to condensed Light mana into grains to be placed around. Since it's only condensation, the amount of mana required for [Conversion] is low since it remains in the Light mana state. The [Action] part of the formula was simply "stick to whatever object it hits", the grains of Light mana remained on my staff when he was using his sword to

follow it to strike at me. The second formula merely told the grains to "decompress" as he put it and turns it into a blinding flash of light. The side effect of that is that it creates a "mana vacuum" as it also draws in surrounding mana to decompress the condensed Light mana. Apparently he wanted to add a third formula to make use of the un-compressed Light mana, but he said his head couldn't handle it so he decided to use a physical attack instead. "There's always another mountain taller than the one you see" kept ringing in my head for a while.

I'm now desperately trying to think up of a new ways to use mana. There's probably only the four of us aside from the developers that knows of this method of using mana. And only two of us are really pushing the envelope in term of using it, I really can't wait to see something new again!

"...bel! Isabel!"

"Huh?" I lift my my arm off the large table and roll toward the source of the voice without lifting my head off of it. "What is it? My break isn't over yet... is it?" I bring my arm back up onto the table to check my watch. Seeing that I still have half an hour, I drop my arm down again, looking at my two colleagues that are standing in front of me. They have been getting lovey-dovey lately, it's against company policies to have romantic relationships on the base, but what can you expect when you have people stuck here for months at a time? I even heard the chief mechanic has been stuck here for 2 years straight. It's already amazing that people are willing to return to Marigold base no matter how good the pay is. I mean, who would want to live underground all year round in the middle of Antarctica?

"We heard you play Second Phantasia, so we wanted to ask you if it's worth it to have some consoles installed in the rec room."

Oh right, this petite, chestnut-haired, middle aged woman is part of the psychological welfare management team.

"To be honest, we are pretty interested in it as well." The bespectacled, beanpole of a man chimes in. I think he's younger than her by quite a few years, but I've seen stranger things, one has to account for taste as well.

*Oh! Maybe... yes... this is doable!*

"You know what, why don't you two come on down and try it. George! Hey! George!" I wave down my co-worker/subordinate. "I will be giving psych a hand on something, com me if anything important come up, you are in charge for now." The burly blond man in a white lab coat turns around, flicks and points his two index fingers at me before returning to work.

I drag my head off the table and stands up. "Alright, follow me." I lead them to my private room with a smile on my face.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Get up you maggots! You think the enemy will wait while you rest on your lily ass?!"

A lean, muscular, middle aged man covered in scars shouts at the figures in camo fatigues. Kun is at the head of the group, breathing rhythmically while the other figures are either sitting down or laying flat on their back, catching their breaths.

"Gui and I caught some snacks, give us a bit."

\*shu\*

Kun turns his back toward the man, revealing several rabbits dangling upside down from a rope on his back along with a knapsack of vegetables. The man beams and lifts his brows for a moment and nods his head toward one of the few buildings in the area.

Kun and Gui head toward the makeshift outdoor kitchen that the group of trainees built. "Alright you maggots, you heard him! There will be snacks! Whoever fails the next set won't receive any!" A chorus of groans answer in reply as the figures force themselves into a standing position.

They had been following Kun through some tough terrains until just a moment ago. During their trek, the gray fox and Kun would occasionally dash off into god know where and come back with a rabbit. Every so often, the young man would grab seemingly random plants and either start chewing on them or throw it into his pack, the gray fox does the same thing with plants and insects.

By the time they got back, the group was completely ragged while the young man leading them was just slightly winded. The group looked at him in disbelief when he just walked away and started working as if it was the most natural thing, with the dangling rabbits trying to escape the ropes every now and then.

"50 more pushups!" Their instructor bark orders after orders, before all of them finished their set, he already started barking other orders. "50 squats! On the double!" The tantalizing scent of roasting meat slowly drifts toward the group, a few starts gulping unconsciously in response. "Focus! 10 suicide dash, GO! The last one won't get anything!"

\*WAAAAAA!\*

After an ear deafening shout, all the figures got a sudden burst of energy as they run back and forth between two lines, diving to touch the line on the last dash.

Walking up to the last man that's still on the ground, the instructor starts barking. "You! Nothing! Stick with your rations!" Walking back a bit to address the rest of the group. "And no sharing! If you want extra food, either catch it yourself or don't come in last like this maggot here!"

"Sir yes sir!"

"Dismissed!"

The group slowly makes their way to the makeshift kitchen with large fallen logs as chairs and tables.

"Everyone go grab a ration and then line up, and I mean everyone." Kun points toward the small stack of military rations before heading back behind the makeshift blinds for the kitchen. He rips entire roasted rabbits apart and starts seasoning them when he enters. The group did as told and lined up obediently right outside. Kun grabs some greens from a stack of washed vegetable and plants he had prepared previously, using them to grab a piece of the prepared meat and hands it to each individual who heads toward the logs after receiving their share.

The last individual, the man who had come last in the training, arrived last with a sullen look. Kun points towards the man, opening his mouth wide open and points at his own head. The man scrunches his



forehead, but open his mouth, Kun quickly grab a small piece of meat along with some greens and tosses it into the man's mouth. He then put his index finger on his lips and move his eyeballs toward the instructor that's slowly making his way over before giving the man a wink. The man immediately starts chewing the tidbit of food before swallowing. Kun gives him a nod toward the exit and say in a clear voice, "sorry buddy, nothing for those that end up last."

This is a ruse devised by Kun when his uncle was complaining about the lack of motivation among the trainees two years or so back. Humans are very simple beings, especially when they are tired. Nothing seasons food better than hard physical labour, so Kun used this to make a carrot and stick system.

On the first day of training, he would cook some food that he'd catch during the trek, he would prepare them as the group goes through their training. The smell would make their instincts go into overdrive and they would put out their maximum effort, especially when there's the penalty of the person being last receiving nothing. For the record, military rations are bland and doesn't do much to satisfy hunger. The eventual loser will receive a bite to taste it, it looks as if Kun is acting in goodwill, but it's really a cruel tease. If the loser never got a taste of the reward, how would they know what they are missing? When the next mealtime comes around, they will work their ass off to avoid being last again. After going through this for 2-3 weeks, any normal persons would become a well oiled training machine. By the way, this token of "goodwill" only applies on the first day.

\*baku baku\*

Gui walks into kitchen after giving himself a shake outside.

"Alright, let's go eat." Kun bring out two whole rabbits, which lays on

top of a mound greens and fruits on a large plate. He set it on a log in front of his uncle, with Gui sitting himself right next to them.

The three of them start digging in, that's until the usual chatter among the trainee become deathly silent. This is the second part of Kun's plan.

\*grr grr\*

Gui licks his lips after finishing a piece of roasted rabbit before growling at the men and women staring at them, baring his fangs. Their instructor stops eating, giving a them a death stare. "You maggots! Even the fox is looking down at you! If you want more food, either find your own or help them hunt! Gui here is generous enough to share his food with you!" Gui starts nuzzling the middle aged man, as if agreeing, then start eating again.

Most of trainees look down in shame and resume eating their bland rations, they had long since finished the greens and meat. Some even had tears in their eyes. This might seem tough and excessive, but it is to motivate them to learn about hunting and foraging. War is still fought with swords and shields, with arrows and siege engines providing long range support. Logistics are unreliable at the best of times, let alone during a drawn out battle. Soldiers need to be able to survive on their own if they ever become cut off, so self-sustenance is extremely vital.

The revival of humanity has been met with numerous stumbling blocks. By the late 21st century, fossil fuels and other resources have been completely used up save a few isolated pockets. Following the apocalyptic Aurora events, even radioactive materials have pretty much ceased to exist. As such, humanity had to rely on their own power, that of beasts and nature for energy. The Aurora events have

left a deep scar in the minds of humanity, each time an Aurora appears, any and all volatile material will ignite, causing indiscriminate destruction. During the Age of Recovery, a certain nation in Africa tried to reinvent gunpowder for military use. An incidental passing Aurora caused the nation to be filled with craters. There were other nations that tried as well, whom met similar fates. After a while, no other nations bothered to research guns and explosives.

As such, even in modern times, wars are still fought with humanity's own hands and ingenuity. As technology reached the point where ancient relics can be accessed once more, renewable energy and electronic technology grew by leaps and bounds. There were attempts to utilize more complex weapons recorded in the relics, but none were able to reconstruct them due to missing key resources. This leaves the world in a curious situation of an advanced race fighting wars in a primitive way.

This unique technological shift caused the focus of any war to lean toward capable soldiers instead of technology. With the assistance of his dead father's war buddy, Kun has turned his isolated piece of land at the eastern tip of the Jervis Inlet into a top notch training facility.

"So Hank, what do you think of the plan?"

"If what you said is true, we could be running this all year round. With the winter portion as 'Mental Training'".

"Also, I'm thinking of bringing 'them' along."

The scar-covered man raise one of his brows. "You are serious?"

"Yes, I really think it will work out, there might be some problems, but if we are really going to expand, we will need some help. Especially

from those with experience, we can't hope to handle all of it ourselves, right?"

The trainees are cleaning up after themselves before heading into the shades. There's a period of rest before the next training session begins. Hank shifts his eyes left, then right, then left again, as though he's arguing with himself inside his head.

"We can always fire them if they prove useless, but I think they deserve a chance."

A wide smile slowly spreads on Hank's face, grabbing Kun's shoulders with his slightly greasy hands, "You really are your father's son."

\*pero pero\*

Gui, not wanting to be left out, starts licking Kun's face.

"Them" is referring to the veterans that had returned permanently wounded from the previous wars. Kun remembers his dad would always bring his fellow troops to this very site for a summer retreat each year. The group had shrunk over the years, eventually even his dad was gone. But there are quite a few remaining ones that are alive, if you can call it that. Although the country provides living allowance for these veterans, they are often unemployed. Few would hire them, especially if they are missing limbs or have facial disfigurement. There's always those remembrance holidays, but those are just token gestures to placate the masses, doing nothing to help those who suffered in the war for the sake of the country.

With a feeling of helplessness, this had often ended up with the veterans either addicted to one thing or another, some even committed suicide, others saw their families fall into poverty or they end up

completely shattered. The country doesn't really care since it would be saving them on expenditure, if there weren't any backlashes, it isn't unthinkable for the country to euthanize them "for the greater good of society".

"Alright, alright, let's finish up, you still have to wring those guys dry."

Kun bashfully uses a readily available excuse to escape Hank's praise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sender: Bell  
Subject: Another source of income for the academy

Well kiddos, I am thinking about using the Academy as a resorts of sorts. We can probably get some cash out of it and use it to purchase gold, tell me what you guys think. I will try to log in the next week or the week after, XOXO

\* \* \* \* \*

Sender: Kun

Subject: About that plan I mentioned before

Guys, I had discussed with my partner, I'm thinking of expanding my training facility into "Second Phantasia". I know it's an untested idea, but I think this can really work. I know I didn't really share this, but I lease out my small piece of land to train soldiers, been doing that for a little over two years. So we will never be short of students, even if it's a slightly different kind. Don't worry, they won't cause trouble, or more like, they don't dare to cause trouble. See you guys soon.

# The Calm before the Storm

\*Wa\*

"Iiiyyyyyyyyyaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Go Rick-sama~"

"Go captain! Show him the strength of a Feian!"

There are small crowds that completely filled up the various inspection galleys at the barracks. Teenagers, boys and girls, wives of the elders and guards, off duty guards, anyone that had free time that knew about the fight had shown up. In the moderately sized, empty training field, two figures faces off against each other while covered in dirt. One was a young blonde man wielding two wooden daggers, with several more daggers strapped in place front and back with a harness with loops to hold them, quite a few of the loops are empty. The other is a middle aged man with a scarred face wielding a wooden longsword, moderately armoured in various bronze pieces, holding a large, significantly dented kite shield.

\* \* \* \* \*

Going back a few days... Since the Feian elders had to debate and consider the force to send to **Sardon**, Rick was being hosted by the various elders, trying to curry some favour in the future while Mikhal negotiated with the elders. After being fully fed by eye candies he couldn't touch, he was stiff and also bored stiff. Looking for something to do, he walked around the city, somehow becoming fast friends with the guards. He even went with them to hunt down wild beasts that bother merchants and farmers in the surrounding area.

One thing he has noticed that even though most of the guards are around mid 30s or so in level, they are able to take down beasts level 70+ with no serious injuries. These same beasts merely appear as Level ??? to him, Rick had to rely on the online bestiary for their level. When he asked the guards, they had no clue. According to their experience, the beasts are extremely tough and would be extremely difficult to take on alone, so the level Rick was referring to is likely the base values the immortals used to estimate the strength of any given beast. Since none of them knows for sure, Rick just accepts it as it is.

The negotiation dragged on, while Bell and Kun haven't had a chance to log in, but they did send some messages every now and then. Rick often make himself at home at the guardhouse. One is to dodge the greasy relations managers sent by the various elders and merchants that have been trying to curry favour with him, and secondly because he likes it there. He has also unexpectedly become playmates with the various guards' sons and daughters.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*kachan\*

Rick and some off-duty guards were having a small feast with ale and roasted boar. Rick had hunted it by himself earlier in the day, trying to do a little leveling, he has been going around steady leveling himself, reaching the mid-40s now. He had to get some help from some of the guard's older kids to bring the hulking carcass back, with the wives gutting, cleaning and dividing it before cooking the thing. The ones that helped him got first dibs, while the rest is shared with the rest of the guards. He now has an appreciation of what Kun meant by hunting



is not all fun and games.

This particular boar took him quite a lot of time to bring down, he had to lay various snare traps and shot an entire quiver of arrows to bring it down. He had learned from Kun and Bell that mobs killed without the use of [Skills] will leave their whole corpse behind while those killed with them will turn into particles of light. The more [Skill] one use, the faster the corpse will decompose.

\*gefu\*

"Things certainly are easier with you around." One of the guards gives a satisfied burp before patting his belly.

"Fighting beasts is one thing, but not having to worry about a meal every now and then, it's certainly a relief." Another guard leans back in his chair.

One person can't contribute much in term of beast elimination, but by bringing back some good food, it greatly eases the fatigue and increases morale.

Rick just relaxes and enjoy the ale, for some reason he has been missing Kun's cooking, and even Bell's abuse.

\*kakka kakka\*

A figure with firm footsteps approaches the group from the corridor, before stopping slightly away from the large round table.

The content looking guards stand up quickly and give the figure a salute. Rick turns around to see what's the big deal, recognizing the scarred face man, he gives a salute with his index and middle fingers

on one hand accompanied with a smile.

"Don't mind me, just grabbing a bite here." The man has a smile on his face before grabbing a juicy piece of pork. The guards sit back down, making space for their captain. Despite his tough looking exterior, the captain knows when to take it easy and when to be strict. Since they are all off duty, there's no point to stand on formality. It would pointlessly tire his guards out otherwise. This accommodating attitude resulted in the guards holding him in high regard, even Rick has taken a liking to him despite being chased by him previously.

\*topu topu\*

Pouring himself a mug of ale, the captain takes a drag of the mug before releasing a satisfied belch. "Nothing beats booze and meat after a good day's work." The man take a big bite out of the piece of pork and chews with a content face.

"Hear hear!" The guards raise their mugs lazily for a quick cheer before drinking again. With the occasional game that Rick brings in, the guards had been able to save a copper here and there, resulting in them being able to afford an entire barrel of ale and even some extra money for their family. Tonight is as good a time as any to open its tap. The group resumes their idle chit chat, boasting about their children, or talking about the different formations and tactics for dealing with certain beasts.

Licking his fingers, the captain turns to Rick with a serious face. "You know, I've been meaning to ask, weren't you an archer? Some of the guys here have been saying you even go into some melee fights with bears and the like."

"I've been trying to practice something lately." Rick replies rather

sheepishly, he had been learning dual wielding from Kun before. Kun uses a mix of a baton or some other blunt striking instrument with a bladed weapon, according to him, this allows him the option to switch to whichever weapon is more effective as the main attack while the other can act as a shield of sorts. Since Rick's style is fundamentally different from Kun's, he just learned what he can about the various grips and stances before making them his own.

"You know, I've been getting a little rusty lately just fighting beasts..." Taking another drag from his mug, before continuing. "Can I interest you in a spar?"

Maybe it is the ale that's talking, but Rick just nods heartily. The captain is level ??? to Rick, but it's just a spar, he've had hundreds if not thousands of them against Bell alone. "But one thing, you have to be properly armoured." There is a fundamental difference between an user and a non-user. One is called immortal because they can never truly die, the reason all the non-users fear them is not because of their skills, although that can be part of it, but that they can never be killed. One simply can't win a war when the other party can just come back and fight a war of attrition, the immortal simply need to win once to win the war.

Since Rick would simply lose items and experience upon dying, he isn't too worried about himself. But if he somehow severely injure the captain by accident, it could have serious consequences. Seeing the captain hesitate a little, Rick downs his mug before adding. "Non-negotiable". The captain just smiles at the youth's consideration and nods.

"Oh! There's going to be a fight?!"

"FIGHT! FIGHT!"

The various guards start pounding the table with their mugs, quite a

few are chanting, some have even started a betting pool. Knowing that it is all in good fun, no one bets more than a copper.

\* \* \* \* \*

"«Fire»!" The youth throws a wooden dagger as he rushes toward the armoured man. Expecting a combination attack similar to what the youth has previously done, the man brings his kite shield tight to his body, preparing to charge when the second attack comes.

\*zudon\*

After the enchanted wooden dagger lands harmlessly against the shield, "«Shield Bash»!" The man slams his shoulder forward, hoping to catch the youth off guard. Unexpectedly, the youth ran way back to where he had previously abandoned his bow, The dash forward was simply a misdirection. "«Ice»!", the man quickly pulls the shield back to cover his body. Another \*zudon\* echoes among the cheers in the barrack. The fight has been a clinical display of offensive and defensive techniques.

Rick has been attacking unpredictably, starting with a series of bow attacks initially when the fight started, he tossed the bow aside and charged into the man who had been steadily advancing while hiding behind the shield. Using his enchantment skill to its fullest, Rick has been wearing down the captain's defense. Although Rick doesn't have any special [Skill]s like the rest of his party, he can still use some basic formulas. By using the same [Source] and [Conversion] from basic elemental [Spell]s, he was able to produce some elemental (physical) mana. By changing the [Action] to a simple "stick to whatever he's holding", he can turn anything he holds onto into an elemental

weapon.

With a combination of bow attacks, thrown daggers and melee strikes, Rick has been on the assault. The captain on the other hand had been expertly parrying with his sword, blocking everything else with his kite shield and even managed to land a light counter attack with his sword during one of the melee exchanges.

\*zudon dottaa dottaa\*

The captain expertly moves around the center of the field, slowly limiting Rick's routes. Rick on the other hand shoots numerous arrows at various angles, causing the captain to adjust his shield accordingly as he advances. The wooden arrows bounces off the misshapen kite shield each time they are fired.

Eventually Rick was cornered when he finally ran out of arrows. The scarred man shifts left and right, swinging his sword, blocking all of Rick's escape routes. The spectators become silent as the moment of truth is approaching. The youth throws a dagger when the captain approaches within a few steps. Seeing that the dagger isn't enchanted, the man assumes the youth had ran out of mana and charges right in with the battered shield raised.

\*zaa\*

"«Flame»!" Unable to risk taking a direct hit of a higher level magical assault, the captain drops to one knee and slides a bit, completely blocking his body with the shield. He can feel the heat building up and uses «Reinforce» to increase his heat resistance. Rick had grab a handful of dirt from the ground before enchanting it with fire, making it spread the heat more evenly and to hopefully have it stick to the shield.

\*tatatata ton\*

Rick take this chance to run up to the man kneeling on the floor and leaps over him "«Water»!", throwing a dagger straight down as he does so. Thanks to his experience, the captain reacts quickly, swinging the shield up to block, followed by the sword.

\*shaaaa\*

\*gashan\*

\*zushin\*

\*ton\*

\*dottaa\*

A cloud of steam rise from the kite shield before it crumbles in the man's hand. The wooden sword that continued to swing despite the loss of the shield smacks the still airborne archer squarely in the collarbone as a dagger bounce harmlessly off the captain's pauldron. Rick lands flat on his back after the strike, unable to recover in time.

\*wa\*

\*pachi\*

The crowd cheers and applauds. The man walks up to the groaning youth and offers him a hand, dragging him up. Rick rubs his neck after getting up. "Man! That was close!" The youth grabs the man's arm and lifts it into the air, causing even louder cheers and applauds.

The captain shifts his eyeballs to the scrapped shield, had he not been using a metal shield and armour, he can already imagine the end result. He isn't too sure if this immortal is simply dense... or that he's just being polite. Of course there's no way for him to know that the youth is an idiot who just considers it his loss since he failed to even hit the

man.

Taking a bow, the two dust themselves off before heading into the barracks to see if there are any injuries that needs to be treated.

\* \* \* \* \*

...

\*takku\*

"1 1 is 1"

"1 1 is 1"

"1 2 is 2"

"1 2 is 2"

"1 3 is 3"

"1 3 is 3"

...

Till, De'muel and Mak'ra are reciting the Nine Nine song, with the children following.

*[T/N: It's the song form of the multiplication table in Chinese and Japanese.]*

\* \* \* \* \*

\*takku\*

"A for anaconda."

"B for beast."

...

De'muel and Mak'ra are teaching the younger students how to read and write.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*zushin\*

\*gasa\*

"«Air Hammer»!"

"«Earth Pillar»!"

"Don't damage the trees unnecessarily okay~?"

Till and Dosnak, who is under a makeshift parasol, are directing magic practice and the clearing of the trees behind the workshop, next to the farming fields.

\* \* \* \* \*



\*kasa kasa\*

" ... "

" ... "

"Look at where you are moving before you move!" Isnic lightly chucks a piece of rock at the one that caused the rustle in the bush. Till is casting «Gust» intermittently to cause the bush and trees to sway. Small, agile demihumans as well as aerial demihumans are trying to reach the finish line without causing a sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the incident with the amulet, Till had mostly recovered from her period of depression. With her cheerfulness returning, the rest of the students also became happier as well. Without her mental burden, she has been going through some scenarios on her own. This resulted in Till modifying the academy's curriculum. With the absence of the other three, lesson time has been dramatically reduced. There's only so much self-study students can do without an instructor, so Till spent some time with the four older ones to brainstorm some ideas. The theme being "What would one need to survive".

Farming and foraging had already been taught starting at a young age, so the students won't starve even if they are suddenly thrown into the wilderness. So that just leaves "Self-reliance", "Shelter", "Clothing" and "Income". Every single student had already learned a method of self-defense from the her party and can get food if they absolutely need to, so self-reliance is mostly covered. Most of them might not

match up to a proper army, but they can deal with beasts and have the strength to rival any militia. "Shelter" and "Clothing" can be easily solved if they have "Purchasing Power". So in short, a method of "earning income" is what is required for them to survive.

Being a soldier or a mercenary is a dangerous job, so focus should be on non-combat roles. It was decided that "arithmetics", "literacy", "craftsmanship" and "traveling" should be added. Literacy is compulsory, while the other categories are open to those that have aptitude in them. "Traveling" is further divided into two types, "silent traveling" for escaping, relaying messages and so forth while "bagged traveling" for transporting goods as is common for merchants, peddlers and logistic soldiers. Adhering to the concept of "judge a fish by its ability to swim, not its ability to climb" , this gives the students the best chance of employment regardless of where they are. Of course, those that have interest in fields they are not particular good at are welcome to attend the classes.

None of them noticed, but what they are doing is on par with, if not better than, schooling for nobles. Instead of specific vocational training provided by guilds or attending religious institutes like upper class nobles and royalties, the Academy is providing "General Vocation Education". In a society where literacy rate is all but non-existent among the peasantry and professions often being inherited, the ability to move between jobs is unheard of. Unlike the common education system on Earth, the curriculum is flexible and completely focused on necessary skills. Of course, no one in the Academy realizes the groundbreaking work they are doing.

During this time period, there are rumours of [Dawn's Moonlight] almost finishing off the [Boss] in [Barghest Dungeon], but was interrupted by [Monochrome Blades] at the last moment, allowing it to retreat and return with more monsters, wiping both [Raid]s out. This resulted

in another prolonged battle between the two guilds, fortunately they had fought near the [Field of Ashes] and haven't advanced further into **Sardon**. Meanwhile, Till and the leading students busy themselves with setting up plans for when the other 3 return, time is ticking, whatever plans they have, it will have to begin as soon as everyone's back.

# Instigate

"You did what?!"

"Hehehe, don't worry, he didn't see us."

"You cheeky little..."

Bell reaches over and starts pulling Till's cheeks, who just make little giggle sounds. Revising their plan for the king of **Sardon**, since Till already met him albeit under a different circumstance than previously planned.

On the other side of the table, Kun put his cup of tea down after taking a sip.

"Hmm... did you come up with this, De'muel?"

"No, it was all Mak'ra this time."

"Are these numbers correct, Mak'ra?"

"It should be, I had Rick-sensei ask around in Feia before his return. Considering the reaction of both the Sardonian messenger from before and the guards that stopped by almost a week ago, I'd say this is a fair estimate." Mak'ra goes through the stack of documents before retrieving a specific sheet of treated hide. "We can sell it to merchants in Ashentor and Feia, minus transportation and wage, we would be making at least 4 gold coins a shipment. With the money, we can expand ourselves, even have a plantation nearby."

Kun stares at the figures and diagram carefully. "This won't do,

Mak'ra." Kun is shaking his head. Mak'ra is slightly shocked, grabbing the documents to give them a second look. De'muel is looking on questioningly, he might not be as detailed at planning as Mak'ra, but even he can see the benefits of Mak'ra's proposal.

They were exposed to the idea of "Commercial Trading" from Bell's lesson on **Zrewheic** history and its roles. It can easily make or break a country, as well as a powerful tool in securing funds and influence.

"What do you mean, Kun-sensei? I don't see anything wrong with this." Mak'ra is baffled, giving the documents another read through. Kun gives a wry smile.

"You are too honest." The two demihumans look at each other questioningly.

\*goso goso\*

Digging into one of his packs, Kun brings out a carefully wrapped food package and lays it on the table. Untying the knots, revealing a mound of clustered clumps of mixed nuts, seeds and dried fruits. Tossing a chunk each to both of his students, he grabs one for himself to chew on. "Go ahead, try it." Two other hands drift by and grab a handful each, uninvited. The two demihumans hesitantly take a bite and chew slowly.

\*bori bori\*

Two pair of eyes widen, their iris contracting. The two demihumans finish their first ever trail mix in a trance. Kun plays coy and asks them "What do you think?"

Silence hangs in the air as the two finish smacking their lips.

"It's crunchy... and chewy..."

"And sweet, savory... a little sour?"

"What if I told you this is worth a gold?" Kun casually slaps a paw away from the pile of trail mix as he packs it away. The two pairs of eyes go wide again. Giving them a moment before continuing, "gotcha."

The two look at each other, at Kun, at the package, back to Kun again.

"Nuts, honey, seeds, fruits, a jar and some knowhow, it barely cost half a silver, and that's mostly from buying the jar in the first place, which is reusable." Carefully retying his packs, Kun sits back up. "But you two believed me when I said a gold, didn't you?"

De'muel was the first to react, nodding his head with a smile on his face. Mak'ra still has his eyebrows scrunched, seeing that that his teacher isn't going to explain himself, he looks toward his older brother.

"It's simple, we just ate something delicious that we never ate before. So sensei just said a random price... but since we don't know better, we believed him." Kun nods his head sagely.

"There's also the matter of supply and demand, but you will have to ask Bell-sensei about that."

Kun takes a drink from the tea to clear the stickiness from his mouth. Putting the cup down, he grabs the stack of documents and quickly sorts them into three piles.

"These ideas are workable, you can start on them right away. I see you

guys have started on some of them already." The farming field had already been expanded, with another section of trees being cleared. The four oldest ones had assisted Till with her curriculum reform and used the field clearing to train those in the traveller class on transportation, those in the magic class in using finesse in their spells and the craftsmen class by preparing the cleared trees. It was a combination of classes working toward one goal. It might not have been efficient, but it certainly gave the students much needed experience.

"These will need some reworking, including this trade proposal." Kun put half of the remaining documents into another stack. "I will discuss these with the rest of them."

The two grab the documents on the table and stand in front of Kun. They remain there as he tries to finish the rest of his tea. "Is there something else?"

The two of them grab a string of copper coins each from their pockets. "Can we buy some of those... um... things, Kun-sensei?"

Kun brings a hand to his forehead and starts laughing.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*bori bori\*

"Hmm... you know you could have asked for more you know." Bell is chewing on a cluster of trail mix, with quite a bit more in her other hand.

\*bori bori\*

"We didn't know how much to ask for. We thought we asked for too much when he hesitated." Likewise, Till is chewing on a cluster of trail mix as well.

\*zuzu\*

"Well, not much we can do now, bet the king's gonna be pretty suspicious." Bell resumes drinking her tea before grabbing another clump of trail mix and toss it in her mouth.

\*zuzu\*

"The maps will come in handy though~"

"What do you have in mind?"

\*bori bori bori bori\*

"We can pull a Prince Liam~"

"Oooooohh! Ow." Bell's hand was slapped away when she reached over for more trail mix from the pile. She pouts when Kun didn't even react.

"We can scout around and train the kids in the 'silent traveler' group."

\*zuzuu\*

"You are a kid yourself, kiddo. Next time you do something that dangerous again, I'll stretch your cheeks out into a mochi."

Till merely sticks her tongue out before going back to her trail mix and tea. Bell starts thinking while Till finishes her snack.



"But which one should we target first?"

"Dawn's Moonlight of course~" Till puts her cup down and smiles mischievously.

"Any particular reasons?"

"Remember those armour fragments from the raider?"

"Ahhhhhhh... Yes, if we-"

"Hahahahaha." Kun interrupts her sentence with his unexpected laughter. The two turn toward the boys that had been going through the plans. De'muel and Mak'ra are holding out a string of copper in front of them, it looks like it's their saved up allowance. Kun just waves his hands, indicating they should put it away. He's just keeps smiling and shaking his head at the same time.

\*goso goso\*

He goes into the packs again, grabbing a different package from the ones before and tosses it to De'muel. "Make sure everyone gets to try some alright?"

"Yes, sensei!" The two happily dash off, one toward the fields, another toward the buildings. No doubt all work and self-study will temporarily grind to a halt.

Kun turns back toward his tea, finally getting to finish the last of it, recalling the time when his father gave him his first piece of fruit taffy. He looks at the girls as he puts his cup down, shifting his eyes between the two. "Is there something on my face?"

\*buu\*

"Ah, em, yes, Till said we should copy Prince Liam from the 3rd dynasty. We will get Rick to completely close off the western half of the Sardon that's adjacent to any structures held by either Dawn's Moonlight or Monochrome Blades. Giving the false impression that everything in the region is closed off, we..."

\* \* \* \* \*

\*kasa kasa\*

A puddle moves toward the figure dressed in midnight blue, raising into a humanoid shape before nodding. The figure looks up at the trees where a small figure is perched on a tall branch.

The figure holds his right hand to his ear and send the message, "Tabbies are go, repeat, Tabbies are go."

"Ah, um, affirmative." A small, slightly hesitant voice replies from the PM.

\*hyuu gaba gaba\*

With a moonless sky, the three figures hidden in the forest, not too far from the lights of the braziers that dots the two story fort, give the go ahead. Up in the sky, small, indistinguishable dots that were circling above the fort drop 2 objects.

\*fuu fuu gaba gaba\*

A small figure, dressed in midnight blue with a hood similar to a ninja, smiles as it drops rapidly to the ground from the sky, feet first, cutting into the wind.

"heee." Next to her, a larger, dark beast similar to a black panther is tumbling, flipping around and even spinning like a helicopter blade as it falls, resisting the urge to scream in joy.

The two rapidly and silently dive toward the roof of the fort.

\* \* \* \* \*

Waiting in anticipation as the ground nears, I stop playing around in the air and get into a landing position by stretching myself out on all fours.

"Ready?"

I turn and give the dark figure a nod. A gust suddenly blasts us from underneath, temporarily pushing us up. We fall again for a few moments before this is repeated. This goes on a few more times before we each land soundlessly behind different parapets at the roof of the fort.

I can still hear my heart pounding from the skydive just a moment ago. That was intense!

A buzz tickles my right ear before a message comes, "okay, there are about a dozen active users guarding the place, two have entered the room in the front on the second level, two are playing some minigame above the gate and 4 are chatting around a brazier. The rest are probably inside."

I take a deep breath to calm myself to focus on the tasks at hand. I look at the chibi, puffy ninja beside me, who in turn is staring intently at the brazier with a crowd surrounding it. I retract my claws and slowly stalk my way toward the trapdoor near the corner without getting up, just in case anyone shows up unexpectedly. The roof is easily 40 meters in length and probably just slightly narrower across.

Grabbing a few blocks of wood, that's cut out from a medium sized branch, from a pouch tied to my back, I waited.

\*fyhhuuuuu\*

\*ki-ko ki-ko\*

\*ga ga ga...\*

\*gakon gakon gakon...\*

A sudden gust of wind knocks pass the fort, I can hear the braziers and window squeak. Some braziers must have tipped over since I can hear the metal sound of it hitting the floor and the sound of charcoal bouncing about. Taking this opportunity, I throw the blocks of wood at the backgate.

"Bloody wind!"

"Damn cheap firestands, couldn't these damn Sardonian bastards use something heavier..."

"Quit complaining and set it back up."

"Ah screw you too! Get the idiots inside to come help."

\*kara kara\*

\*kata kata\*

The sound of doors swinging open and close followed by footsteps can

be heard.

My chibi partner holds up a hand, outstretched, so 5 came out. So that just leaves 1 in the back gate or inside. I can see completely fine in low light thanks to my racial trait, so this is nothing.

*This is probably the best chance I will get tonight.*

I nod at my partner before looking over the parapet, seeing that it's clear, I jump down onto the rampart. I stay perfectly still after landing, I didn't make a sound landing, but one can never be too safe. I take a quick look around, seeing no one below or on the same floor, I jump once more, onto the first floor this time.

According to the maps and layout of the fort that Rick had sent from **Orllewintor**, the sleeping quarters are located on the second level at the back of the fort, with an officer bedroom and a communal quarter. The main floor holds the communal eating area, stockroom, armoury and meeting hall.

I double check the area, seeing no changes, move to toward the back-door that leads to the stockroom. "What's the situation, Till?"

"They are trying to relight the braziers, you have a few minutes at most."

"Gotcha." Taking some deep breaths, I grab the collapsed halberd from my back in one paw and the door handle in another. According to the blueprint, as long as there's no one in the stockroom, the range of the chatroom will not reach them. I breathe out a long silent breath then start moving quickly.

I activate a chatroom, open the door, enter the room quickly, close the door and deactivate it. The hair on my body went from dark blue

to red back to dark blue again as my camouflage [Growth] ability gets interrupted by the chatroom.

\*pira pira\*

I feel as though there's a lump in my throat as my heart pounds relentlessly. There's someone doing something in the other room. I slowly edge my way toward the sound, it should be the armoury if I recall correctly. Peeking into the door, I...

...

...

extend my halberd and slash at the hairy, muscular man that's in the middle of changing with a long, frilly, pink dress partially above his head. Knocking the man to the ground, I quickly jab the blunt end of the halberd where his head is repeatedly before chopping his semi-exposed lower half until the \*bleep\* can no longer be called a \*bleep\* holy \*bleep\* \*bleep\* \*bleep\* no one \*bleep\* prepared me for this. I kept chopping even after the man disappeared and the dress turned into particles of light.

I no longer care at this point, so I started to slash at all the leather and cloth body armours and shove all of the smallest armaments into the pouch where I had kept the wooden blocks. I quickly dash into the stockroom, grabbing a nearby cloth, throw all the assorted potions onto it, wrap it up and stomp on them. There are some ingredients laying around, grabbing whatever looks delicious or expensive, I shove them into the bulging pouch. I open the cloth back up, throw the ingredients on it, slice them up randomly, wrap it up with the soaked cloth filled with glass shards and slice it again with my halberd.

*The rage... it's not subsiding! Why must I see such a sight!*

I'm screaming in my head, "they are heading back now Bell-ne, hurry, I can probably knock another one down to delay them."

"Do it."

The PM wake me up from the cold rage, recalling what I was here for, I ran up the stairs into the sleeping quarters. There are over 30 logged out users here, I quickly got to work, decapitating them each with one swing of my halberd and taking the resulting crystals. I stroll into the officer's bedroom, seeing the shining armour he has on, I strip it off of him, take one of the larger backpacks hanging on a rack and stuff them inside. I finish him off with one strike. I make a quick sweep of the room and see the chest. I go up to it, but it's locked

\*kara kara\*

"Oh god what happened here?!"

"Holy shit!"

"Quick! Seal the exits!"

*GOD DAMN IT!*

\*dan\*

\*ka-ka gishi gishi\*

I break the chest from the top with my halberd, shove everything inside into the backpack and dash out the second story exit. I put a hand to my right ear and message Kun a simple, "go."

\*bou\*

\*dokkan dokkan\*

"We are under attack! Fireball from the front and... Ahh!"

"The back is under attack! Gather at the front!"

\*dokkan\*

\*kara kara\*

I exit the door, throw the large backpack to the roof and leap up. There's a blaze burning at the gate while the backgate is mostly rubble. Those blocks of wood were hollowed, filled with oil and «Star Dust», so its destructive power is nothing to scoff at once Kun use «Flame» remotely. The active guards had huddled somewhere outside the gate, probably thinking there's an invasion.

"Quickly, Bell-ne!"

"Yeah, let's go, I think I am going to need some eye bleach."

"Eye bleach?" The chibi ninja launches us soundlessly far, far into the air where a group of our students is waiting for us.

\*hyuu\*

I desperately focus on the refreshing feeling of the cold night air rushing by as I try to forget that hair-rising, nerve cringing sight moments ago.



# Isolate

\*pyu\*

An arrow cuts through the air from the top of a guarded gate, burying itself in front of a mounted horse. The horse bucks as its rider struggles to keep it under control.

"Get lost! No one's getting in or out!"

"We just need to buy some supplies!"

"Imperial orders, all immortals from the western borders are to be turned back! You lot could be carrying the Reaper for all we know! Archers!"

Two squads of archer appears on top of the 4.5 meter high walls, notching their arrows.

"Damn it! Retreat!"

The rider turns his horse around, ordering the wagon, its passengers and other riders back.

...

"That's the 27th group since last week, none of them look sick."

"Well, the rumour is, a refugee that's heading to his in-law's home in Feia collapsed bleeding from his orifices. Some immortal tried to help him and ended up seriously sick. They were forced into quarantine

and is stuck in the Forest of Illusions."

"Isn't that a death sentence? Won't the immortals come back for revenge?"

"That's just how serious they are treating this. So avoid getting touched by anyone from beyond the walls."

The guard started the chitchat out of boredom, but ended up with a tinge of fear. He double checks his bow string to make sure it is in optimal condition, just in case he needs it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Don't you know who we are?! We are the Dawn's Moonlight!"

"I don't care if you are your daddy's fleshlight! No one is getting in!"

\*shiuu\*

The mounted rider with the [Murderer]'s symbol unexpectedly slashes down with his polearm, the blonde youth backs away quickly, with space to spare.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, SHIT! Die already!"

\*shiuu shiuu shiuu\*

The blonde youth with a large pack is dancing awkwardly in front of the gate, dodging multiple strikes from a bearded horseman with a polearm.

"Dude! Don't touch me! I don't want to get infected!"

"Let us through, we need supplies! And we are not infected with anything!"

"I'm authorized to sell to you! So stop attacking me already!"

"That dinky pack is nowhere near enough!"

"Go elsewhere then! We don't care! Bring that damn curse away from here! What are you morons waiting for?! These guys aren't looking to trade with me... SHOOT ALREADY! These guys are Murderers anyways!"

A guard whistles, waking up the rest of the guards from their daze, before releasing an arrow at the rider that's targeting Rick.

\*pyu\*

"No one is touching my child's godfather! Release!"

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

The archer dodges gracelessly, holding an awkward half-bridge position before backing away as the rest of the archers release their arrows.

\*hihiin\*

The rider's horse is hit, bucking him off before running into the woods. The spot where he and the horseman were looks like a porcupine from the incoming volley save for the part where the horse took the arrows.

"Make sure you don't get their blood on me! I don't want to get infected!"

"Shut the hell up! None of us are infected with anything! Break our way in, boys!"

"OOH!"

A dozen mounted [Murderer]s move up toward the gate, a few of them are even [Villain]s. Two large wagons full of their allies that consist of a similar mix hop out as well. The horsemen were about two dozen paces back while the wagons are lined up right behind them. There's easily about three dozen users wanting to get in.

"Archers ready! Don't let even one of them in!" The guard in charge wastes no time and prepares the next attack.

\*RA\*

The guards reload their bows, the confused users on the wall follow suit.

"2nd volley, release!"

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

"«Fireball»!"

"«Fire Bullets»!"

\*bou\*

\*bo bo bo\*

"Protect the wagons!" One of the mounted [Murderer]s gave the order as soon as the spells were released.

\*ga ga shu ga ga shu\*

The riders beats a hasty retreat from the walls to get away from the arrows. A few of them fall down as their mounts panic from arrows that managed to bite into their flesh.

«Earth Pillar»

\*gorororo\*

"Shit! They have mages! Keith! You are on offence!" One of the [Villain]s wearing a robe exiting from the wagon raised an earthen wall to intercept the fire [Spell]s.

\*dokkaan\*

\*goa gogaa\*

\*doon doon doon\*

The fireball explodes into the hastily erected wall, completely destroying it. The fire bullets that followed hit an unlucky [Murderer] in the head, killing him. It is pretty much an one-sided affair as the defenders unleash waves of attacks, pushing back the attackers. The attackers only have one mage who is desperately defending against magic attacks, they merely have a handful of archers since they brought mostly warriors to help with transportation.

"Aim for the walls, they can't shoot you properly if you are directly under them! Those still mounted, help me with this son of a bitch!" The bearded [Murderer] that was bucked off gives orders as he gets up from the muddy ground.

The first guard reacted quickly. "Archers! Aim for the riders and their mounts, don't let them near Rick! Immortals! Don't let them scale the

walls! Mages! Aim for their wagons! Wipe out any cover they have!"

As the two sides continue their skirmish, Rick and the bearded man faces off against each other. The [Murderer] is half a head taller than the youth, with heavy armour from head to toe.

"You are so dead you lousy kid." The man pulls his face guard down and takes a short swing.

Dodging the polearm easily, the youth waves his index finger at the man. "Go home, grandpa, you are becoming senile." Rick drops the bag on his back and throws a dagger in a smooth motion.

\*ton\*

The dagger bounces off the breastplate, leaving behind a small dent. The man pales slightly beneath his mask when he notices the dagger is made of wood.

"RRRAAAAAA!!!"

Not wanting to lose in initiative, the man charges in with a wide, horizontal swing.

"Oh come on, I know a little girl that can aim better than you." Rick simply limbos the man's strike before springing back upright.

\*shiuu shiuu shiuu shiuu\*

The man swings wildly while the youth side steps, jumps over or ducks under the polearm with ease. This went on for a while before the man finally starts slowing down. At the gate, the fight has mostly ended. The defenders suffered light injuries while the attackers are dead,

dying or seriously injured with a mage and 2 mounted warriors hiding behind their second wagon. The first wagon is a burning wreckage that's smashed to bits.

\*hyuhha\*

"Geez, you aren't even on par with an average guard, how the hell did you guys cause so much trouble anyways?" The youth reaches behind his back with both hands before returning with a pair of ice and fire daggers. The left hand in front holds a wooden dagger coated with ice, constantly giving out a stream of white vapor, the right hand behind holds a wooden dagger surrounded by a small flame, both of these are giving off green auras. "Guess you will do as a punching bag." He switches both daggers into reverse grips, brings his hands up to a height just below his chin and starts to bounce in place.

"RRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

\*fiuu fiuu fiuu\*

The heavily breathing man rushes again with powerful slices, too angry to reply, but this time Rick sticks close to him as though they are dancing.

\*fiuu\*

\*ton\*

\*fiuu\*

\*ton ton\*

\*fiuu\*

\*ton\*

The blonde youth stabs at the man's armour with his ice dagger whenever the man swings his polearm. A jumping stab follows a

sweep, a step-in slash following a chop, a side step stab after an up-swing. Counterattack upon counterattack land relentlessly on the man's armour, shin guard, pauldron, helmet, breastplate, everything was targeted. Although there were numerous strikes, it seems to cause no damage as the exchange goes on for about a minute.

\*fiuu\*

\*don\*

"«Ice Shell»!" The man's armour is now completely covered in ice, the seemingly harmless strikes were to build up Ice mana on the surface of the armour. The man can do no more than waddle pathetically as all his joints are frozen solid.

"RRAAA!! Get me out of this thing!"

"Are you stupid? Would you let a dumbass enemy go?"

"I will god damn kill you if it's the last thing I do!"

"Yeah yeah yeah, whatever, grandpa. Now, I have a very interesting experiment for you! What happens when you put something very hot into something very cold?"

The man stops struggling, his eyes darting wildly behind the face guard. "Please, mercy!"

"Geez, I wonder how many tried that with you before you cut them down. No go, «Antipode»!" Rick's fire dagger flares up into a white flame before he stabs it into various points of the armour.

\*shuu shuu shuu\*



Steam comes off from every stab, with spider web cracks forming right after. The man is completely numbed by the ice, so he doesn't feel the pain yet, but he's still scared nonetheless.

"Ahhh! Nooo!" The man screams as the fire dagger flies toward his face.

"Rick! Duck!" The youth drops flat onto the ground upon recognizing the voice.

\*shiuu\*

A scimitar slices through the spot where Rick's head was at a moment ago. The mounted rider ignores the youth on the floor and grabs the shell shocked man, dragging him onto the horse. Another rider rode by and grabs the pack that Rick had taken off, not even looking back.

"You bunch of cowards!"

"Losers!"

"Run back to your momma's tits!"

Jeers fly from the top of the wall as the attackers retreat. The lone mage on the attacker's side had used «Icicle Storm» against an incoming fireball before setting up an «Earth Pillar». Using the resulting steam and smoke, he used «Mist» to provide cover for the two remaining riders who rode off to the man's rescue.

Rick slowly gets back up, giving the guard that warned him a thumbs up with his left hand. Putting his hand to his right ear, "Dawn's Moonlight have also taken the bait."

"Excellent, are you or anyone hurt?"

"Nah, well, maybe Sammy, kids won't leave him alone now after watching him play with me."

"Hahaha, that's good to hear, we will switch targets then. Keep up the good work."

"Alright Kun, you guys be careful out there."

"You too."

\* \* \* \* \*

The group had put their plan into action a few earth days ago. Rick, along with the Feian forces, arrived in **Ashentor**. En route, they would spread some rumour about some epidemic coming from the west. After the Feian forces met with King Einwil, they departed to **Orllewintor**, spreading the rumour all the while.

There are 4 major cities, 11 towns and numerous villages within the kingdom of Sardon. **Ashentor**, located in the south, southeast of the kingdom, is the imperial capital. Guarding the northeast part of the kingdom is **Niwltor**, the northwest, **Glaswelltor**, and lastly the southwest, Orllewintor. There's only 2 possible routes to enter from the [Field of Ashes], so the Feian force volunteer themselves to be stationed there. With Rick holding station at **Orllewintor** and the captain patrolling the town of **Orllewinwell** slightly to the south.

Using their own funds, the group had Rick give the guards some monies to request aids from users. It is not that they needed the help, but it's to spread even more misinformation as those users helping will overhear bits and pieces of the rumours and spread it themselves.

With both users and non-users talking about the epidemic, even some people within the two guilds will no doubt start to believe it.

Combined with the imperial decree to seal the western borders without much explanation, the rumours will combine to make it seem like "there is an epidemic from the Field of Ashes". The only thing worth noting within the [Field of Ashes] is the [Barghest Dungeon], so it didn't take long for the rumours to become "there is an epidemic originating from Barghest Dungeon". This causes everyone to stay away from the area, including merchants, and to have other kingdoms close their border to [Field of Ashes], isolating those inside and anyone that had contact with the [Barghest Dungeon].

At the same time, Bell, Dosnak, Kun, Till and select students have been doing night raids against forts and keeps held by [Dawn's Moonlight] and occasionally [Monochrome Blades]. Using the maps and blueprints provided by the kingdom that had been using them until recently, the group infiltrated by air, hidden passages, waterways and so forth to kill members of the two guilds and to plunder their supplies. With the news that "no one is willing to come into Field of Ashes due to the epidemic", the two guilds will naturally suspect it had been the opposing guild that raided them, deepening their animosity.

With no supplies going in, they will of course try to acquire supplies from neighbouring kingdoms themselves, but if the kingdoms are willing to mobilize and completely seal their borders, there's nothing the two guilds can do. This will of course escalate until something breaks. To push the two guild into a "fight to the last man" scenario, the night raid group sent certain items plundered from the guilds to Rick. He is to either sell them at ridiculous prices back to the opposing guilds or to "lose the items to them" if trade fails. This is so that the opposing side will eventually see each other using their stolen items, changing from "suspicion" to "confirmation". When the two start to actively raid

---

each other, they will no longer have the ability to attempt to clear the [Barghest Dungeon].

The fight was the second such encounter. As soon as the two guilds start fighting day and night, the next part of the plan can proceed.

# Unexpected Visit

\*kua\*

It's a nice day, the noisy ones are gone and no one's home, guess I'll go for a nap. Bro has been sleeping on that bed thing a lot lately, guess I should try it.

I casually walk my way back home, entering the door. I wipe my feet at the doormat and make my way to the book room. I open the curtains, letting the sun into the room. I hop onto it, it's nice. I can see why he's always on this thing. As the sun warms my body, I close my eyes and fall asleep.

\*chiin\*

**Biometric registration complete. Would you like an avatar?**

"No, leave me alone, let me sleep."

\*chiin\*

**Would you like a tutorial?**

"No, I said leave me alone."

\*chiin\*

**Character creation complete.**

**Welcome to Second Phantasia, Beast Novice, the previous player is located in the southeast of the continent, would you**

---

## like to start there?

I open my eyes in anger, I just want to sleep. "If I say yes, would you shut up?!" I realize I'm not on the bed anymore. There's shiny and spinning lights all around... am I under water?

\*chiin\*

**You are now in the Feia region, thank you for choosing Second Phantasia, I hope your stay is enjoyable!**

\*byun\*

I don't see anyone speaking, the shiny and spinning light get brighter gradually, until I can no longer see and has to close my eyes. The next thing I know, I'm on a hill of grass.

*Where am I? How did I get here?*

I don't think sleep is a good idea now. I sniff the air, but I don't know this place. There are plants, water, animals... oooh, is that a rabbit I smell? Following my nose, I walk quietly along the grass. In a bit, I spot a lone rabbit digging into the ground with big front claws. I don't recall rabbits having claws, but I could always go for some food.

I stalk the prey as usual, waiting for my chance. Seeing its back turn to me, I leap out and grab it by the neck.

\*byoon\*

\*gapu\*

\*supa\*

"Ow!" The damn thing claws my face, causing me to let it go. Wait,

why isn't it running? Shit shit shit! It's standing on two legs and circling me! What kind of rabbit is this?!

I look around, there are some trees maybe 15 seconds away behind it and there's a pond on the left with the same distance. Seeing the claws, I think I will take my chance at the water. I slowly back away, waiting for the rabbit to strike. It leaps at me after a dozen seconds or so, I dodge and take this chance to run into the water. Wait, it's chasing after me?!

\*bashan\*

I run with all my might and dive into the pond, small fishes under me scatter away. I swim leisurely as the rabbit gets to the edge of the water, stopping there and staring at me.

*Oh, so it can't swim at all? This will be easy then.*

I swim to a shallow part of the pond near the shore and circle a bit. The rabbit moves closer to me. I was stupid the first time, but now I know I just need to avoid its claws. I splash some water and then run up to it. As expected, it swipes its claws at me. I was ready though, so I take a side step, grabbing it by the neck and throw it into the water.

\*bashan\*

A nice splashing sound was heard and the rabbit rapidly sinks to the bottom of the pond. It struggles in a panicked fashion before reaching the shallow part of the shore, I run up to it and throw it into the water again.

\*bashan\*

It sinks to the bottom again, but this time it isn't as panicked and reaches the shore in record time. No matter, I will just throw it in again.

\*bashan\*

And again.

\*bashan\*

It struggles to get to the shallow part this time.

\*gapu\*

\*yusa yusa yusa yusa\*

I grab the tired, wet rabbit by the neck and shake it repeatedly. I feel a small \*pakin\* and then drop it on the floor.

\*furu furu\*

I give myself a good shake to dry myself. Normally I would get brother to cook this, but I have no idea how to get back home. Since it hit my face, I will just start eating it raw.

\*pero\*

I lick my lips after finishing most of the rabbit, it's surprisingly plump, I really want to have one cooked. While I'm thinking about how delicious a roasted one of these would be, I hear a loud \*zabun\*. I turn to see where the noise is coming from and see someone had jumped into the water, with a cloud of insects following. Curious, I walk up to the source of the ripple that's a good distance away.



I can see a little one at the bottom.

\*buun buun\*

Oh shit! The swarm of insects is after me now!

\*bashan\*

I jump into the water and get to the bottom of the pond. I remember this happening before when we went after a beehive, the trick is to get to the bottom and stir up the sediment before swimming away and get out from another spot. I start digging up the mud at the bottom before swimming toward the little one.

\*pichan\*

I stick my nose out of the water for a quick breath. The little one isn't moving at all, worried, I dive back down toward it. It seems to not be moving, no good. I drag it along the bottom of the pond, it's somewhat slow going, but it's hard to pull in the water since I can't carry it.

\*pasha pasha\*

I manage to get us to shore on the other end, the cloud of insects seems to be gone.

\*sasu sasu\*

"Hey! Wake up!" I start shaking the small one. Shit! "Someone! Help! Some young one is hurt! Someone! Anyone!"

\*byoon\* I start jumping on the little one while screaming at the top of my lungs.

I see a man running toward us.

"Over here! Quickly!"

The man got near us, others seems to be showing up from the way he came from. He stops about 2 seconds away and stares at me.

"What are you looking at?! Help it! I don't know what to do!"

I back off from the little one, and let the man work. "Well?! DO SOMETHING!"

That seems to have snapped the man out of his stupor and he gets to the little one.

"Charlotte? Damn it! Hurry! I found Charlotte!" The man carries the little one on his back and starts slapping her back.

\*u u aan aan\*

"Shiii, it's okay, it's okay now."

Eventually the little one spits out a mouthful of water and starts crying. The man continues to comfort her.

"Oh good." I relax as soon as the little one starts crying. The man carries her gently while looking at me with a complicated expression.

"um... thank you for saving my niece?" The man with short brown hair is making a confused face when he says, almost like a question.

"She will be okay?"

"um.. yeah."

\*furu furu\*

I shake myself dry now that everything is over and fall over in relief.

"Can I ask where we are?"

Before the man can respond, more men and a woman arrive, surrounding me. Some of the men are wielding sticks. All of them look at me with hostility, I get up when I see the men get into a fighting stance.

\*garuru\*

I growl at them in response.

"Woah woah woah! Easy, it saved Charlotte." The man let the little girl down and put himself between the men and me, the little girl runs up to the woman and begins crying again.

I look up at the back of the first brown-haired man, "I think I will go, take care."

"Wait wait!" The man turns around and tries to stop me. I turn back and see the other men and the woman look at me with more stupid looking faces. "Are you lost?"

I nod my head.

"Um... it isn't much, but come rest at our village first. Sorry for our reaction, we... have never seen your kind before." The man is bowing

toward me now, the rest of them still have their stupid faces on them, but at least I don't see any hostility anymore.

I see no other choice, there are just plants, trees, water, and more of the same. I don't see the large rocky hills anymore, so this is likely nowhere near home. I nod again. The man stands up, and starts leading the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's almost evening now, the sun is low in the sky.

With the help of the brown-haired man, I learned that I am in a place called Feian Plains. I have never heard of this place. But the people also said that the only big rocky hills are to the west which is several months away. It's supposedly dangerous to travel there, so I should either go with a group or wait until what they called merchants come by. It seems I will be stuck here for a while, but this... fluffiness, hhhmmmmmmmm!

The brown-haired man brought me to his home. It's a room that is attached to a bigger home, he served me something they call bread, it is like a long straight branch that you break before eating. I have never had this before! If only there's some tender meat to go with this!

\*konkon\*

\*kara\*

There is a knock on the door before it opens. The brown-haired man had left earlier, telling me to enjoy my meal. It appears he has now returned with the young one and its mother and they enter the room.

"Now what do you say?" The man asks the little one, who is now in an overall without the part that separate the legs.

"Thank you for saving me." It lifts up the cloth hanging off of her and gives a little bow.

"Um... you are welcome." It runs up to me and gives me a hug.

"Now now, let Mr. Gui finish his dinner." The woman gives me a little bow before coming to pick up the little one.

\*karan karan\*

There is this ringing noise, "What the... Gui, you are logged in?"

"BROTHER! Where are you?"

The three of them jump at my sudden yell. "Sorry, sorry, I can hear my brother talking to me." I look around the room, but all I see are the furniture, the food, the wooden floor, the window, the wooden floor above and the three people.

"You... can talk? Um.. give me a minute, I'll try to log you out."

"Log out? I don't see any logs here, just wood."

"Don't worry, I will bring you back."

"Oh, I can come home?!" I start jumping around the room. The three of them are staring at me. "Hm, thank you for the food! My brother is going to bring me home, so I guess this is goodbye."

"Goodbye?" The man half asks.

"Brother?" The woman is just as confused.

The little one struggles away from its mother and gives me another hug. Rubbing its face on my back.

\*chara\*

"Okay Gui, put your eh... paw? Yeah, your paw onto the blinking panel. You will be back right away."

"What's a panel? Oh." A blinking thin box appear in the air. "Okay, I'm leaving now, so long. And stay away from those bees from now on!" I hit the box in the air and everything fades to black.

"Mr. Gui?"

The medium sized furry body collapses onto the floor as though asleep.

"Wait... Mr. Gui is an immortal?!" The short brown-haired man says in shock.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*gishi gishi\*

"Are you okay?" The gray fox gets up from the bed and gently head-butts the young man standing at the head of the bed where a console is located.

\*wo wo\*

"Um... I can't... understand you outside."

\*wo wo\*

"How did you even log in?!"

\*wo guruguru\*

Kun sighs, "at least I understand that, okay, let's go eat first. I'll tell them I will be a little late. I will figure this out later."

\*wo wo wa\*

The two head to the kitchen after Kun types something on the console.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elsewhere on the internet - Second Phantasia forums

"Wow! Someone unlocked the Beast form avatar!"

"But who would use that? How do you even use your skills?"

"There's bound to be a way, don't worry. But they didn't announce an expansion though."

...

"Wah! It's so cute! I'm going to reroll a character just for the avatar!"

"You can finally be the bitch that you are!"

"Shut up you troll."

...

"Request: More Avatars"

"Pffft, as if the company will listen!"

"Actually, they never announced anything, maybe there are more out there?"

...

The official and fans site forums for Second Phantasia exploded with threads talking about the new avatar. There haven't been any announcements about changes to the races, so its appearance was unexpected. Users were allowed to pick a race from Human, Dark Alf (Dwarves and Gnomes), Light Alf (Elves and Mers), and Demihumans (Reverse Anthromorphs) only. The new Beast race is now selectable for new users.

Demands for an answer from the company have been met with silence and redirection, this led to large amounts of users rushing to try out the new race. None of them would have suspected a real animal had entered the game.



Home » Forum » Discussion » General

### Topic: BREAKING NEWS

Subject: Assassination of King Kalladi and the Holy Kingdom of Missouri

As of August 11th, 114 NC, the kingdom of Masault ceases to exist on Amoatlz. According to users, a guild named [Salvation] assisted with the assassination of King Kalladi and helped Chancellor Utorsk in claiming the throne and effectively abolishing the monarchy, ending their 600 years of history. The leader of the guild declared himself First Primarch and named Utorsk the First Apostle, the kingdom will be renamed to Holy Kingdom of Missouri and its religion will be the Church of Latter Day Saviours.

According to some posts below, there are suspicions that the users belong to the Alman Theocracy in midwestern North America since that's the name of its state church as well .

With no additional information, your guess is as good as mine. Users are warned to stay away if they do not belong to the Church as rumours of heresy trials are rampant within the region. This marks the first time users have gained control of an entire kingdom, this will no doubt lead to an age of hegemony as users vie to claim lands of their own. Let's hope it doesn't spill out from the center of the continent to elsewhere.

I sent some emails to Levi. Corp. to ask about the Kingdoms administration system since it isn't in the manual or the tutorials and got a

bland, generic response.

"We at Leviathan Corporation strive to provide the best experience possible for our users, whatever should that experience be. Thank you for using our system, hope you continue to enjoy our product."

In short, we are left figuring out everything for ourselves.

Posted Aug. 11, 114 NC 23:38  
Last Edited Aug, 12, 114 NC 02:17

Subject: None

There is already a kingdom system in place?! How come they didn't advertise this?

Posted Aug. 11, 114 NC 23:43

...

\* \* \* \* \*

\*saku saku\*

"Huh, I thought you guys would be camping out or something."

"Hurry up and get your ass in here, Rick." Bell is standing in a small depression among some mounds, keeping an eye out. There's grass,

bush and shoulder-high shrubs all around. Further to the east, the famed hills of **Sardon** can be seen. Trees line themselves neatly on the hill, forming the forests that surround the various keeps and forts. Most of them had been abandoned by both [Monochrome Blades] and [Dawn's Moonlight] as they concentrate their respective forces into single encampments. This is to lower the success of raids and eliminate the need for supply lines altogether.

Rick walks toward Bell, seeing the small path into a cave, he walks in.

\*sha\*

Bell pulls a sheet of earth with grass growing on it over the opening to the cave before walking further into the cave. Shafts of light pour in from above, revealing a large chamber with a gradual slope leading deeper into the cave. Bell has to duck her head as she walks since the ceiling is slightly too low for her stature.

"Where are these lines of light coming from?"

"We drilled some holes, seems like the ground here is mostly made of limestone-like rocks. Watch your steps, there are some trap holes here." Bell got on all fours and moves her way to the right before heading toward the back of the cave. Except for the path she is on, the entire slope ends with a sheer drop several meters down, ending in a pool of water. Rick looks over in admiration.

"Natural trap, niceee."

"Get in here before I shove you down there." The felinoid is standing at full height, half-concealed by a bend in the wall. It seems there's a passage at the end of the cavern. Rick quickly follows, before stepping into a large chamber that's 10-odd meters wide and probably twice as long.

Shafts of light also illuminate the room, highlighting the various rock furniture and plant woven upholstery. Far in the back, a large group of people are surrounding a smokeless fire.

"Damn, you guys have a mini rock cabin thing going in here." There's a slight twitch on Rick's face.

"Greetings, Rick-sensei." The gathered students turn in his direction upon hearing his voice and gave him a greeting. They turn back immediately toward the holes. The blonde youth raises an eyebrow before walking toward them, with Bell right behind.

"... and that's how you make it." Kun is giving out instructions, finishing a wooden pile in the hole.

\*gakon gakon\*

"Line the large ones on the bottom... cross it with medium ones, then cross it again with twigs, layer the top with tinders... like this?" Isníc builds a wooden pile in another hole a little away from the going fire, it's connected to another hole from the bottom. Basically, it is a U-shaped hole with a flat bottom.

\*shi shi\*

Kun removes the top layer of the pile to inspect her pile. "Pack the bottom and second layer tighter, otherwise you are fine." He then turns around and checks on the other students.

"Eh, how come there's no smoke from the fire?" Rick peeks over, munching on some jerky he had found on a nearby table.

\*kon\*

"That was mine."

The blonde youth holds out the piece of bitten jerky to Bell, who just turns away to look at the students.

"This is called a smokeless fire, this way you can cook and keep warm without anything seeing you." The black-haired young man keeps assisting the demihumans without turning and gives the youth a reply. "Alright, once everyone is done, we will have dinner and then head out after sundown."

"I'm going to get Till's group then."

"Eh? I was wondering where she was."

"There's another room further in." Bell walks to the far left wall before giving it a small push, the wall soundlessly turns to one side, revealing a hidden room where a small figure, a translucent figure and a few others are working in the far corner. Shafts of light filter into this room as well, giving it a soft ambience. She walks in nonchalantly, leaving the wall open.

"Damn..." Rick grabs the false wall and moves it back and forth, it did so without a sound. "Damn..." He gives another exasperated look of admiration before walking in.

"Remember, concentrate on the wind, otherwise it will become uneven."

A small girl is moving her hand slowly over a piece of rock, rounding it off, with small bits and pieces falling off of it.

"Ohhh, using wind magic to cut stones?"

\*kon\*

"What was that for?!" The youth rubs the top of his head.

The handful of students turn and look at their newly arrived teacher. Giving a bow before looking at him with a complicated expression.

"Are you some kind of idiot? Wind can't cut anything." Bell brings a paw to her face as the students whisper among themselves.

"But all the games have wind blades and wind cutting things all the time!"

"Rick-ni, when was the last time you saw wind cutting anything in real life." Till turns around to give him a pitying look, the students give him a similar look as well.

\*funyu\*

"It's okay, ignore him, he is a little stupid. Kun said to wrap things up so we can have dinner."

"Okay~"

"Yes, Bell-sensei!"

Till and the students put the stones they were holding on the floor, dusting themselves off before walking away. Rick has both his hands on his head with a look of disbelief.

"Are you coming or not?"

\* \* \* \* \*

\*uppu\*

"Oh man, I'm going to be sick."

"Who told you to eat so much." Bell leans back in her chair with her eyes closed.

"You have no idea Bell, the stuff they call food in Sardon, it's so bland. Try that for a few weeks and tell me you won't do the same when you've this in front of you."

"You do know this is just field cooking, right?" Kun gives the youth a dubious look.

"I know, you will make a hell of a housewife one day." Rick rests his head on the table with a contented look.

"Eh? Eh? Is Rick-ni proposing?! No fair! I will marry Kun-ni first!" The little girl suddenly got up from her seat.

"Well, aren't you Mr. Popular?" The relaxing catwoman teases the young man in question.

"Hmm... I can always let Bell cook from now on."

"Nononono, I won't mention it anymore." Rick has a small panic attack as he recalls Bell's cooking from the past.

"All joking aside, how should we split this up?" The young man gestures to the pile of pulsating blue and purple crystals on the table.

"We can just split it evenly, but that seems counterproductive."

The group have a gap in level difference. Till was already in her mid 20s when she first met the group. After doing things somewhat separately, Till is now in her mid 60s, Rick in his mid 50s, Bell in her late 50s and Kun in his late 30s. This is due to Rick actively training with the Feian guards and fending off users at **Orlewintor**. Bell and Till raided numerous times, with Bell killing most of the users each time. Kun on the other hand has been stuck with diversion and support, thus rarely had the chance to gain experience.

"Isn't it a no brainer? Just stuff it into Kun, we are going to be fighting head-on soon, so we need some balance."

"Yeah, let's do that~"

"Sounds good then, all yours Kun." Bell points her hand at the pile.

"You sure you don't want to split it evenly?" The black-haired young man scratched his face.

"We are splitting it evenly, hell, we probably owe you more if we count Bell's cooking."

"Yeah~!"

\*kon\* \*kon\*

Bell gives both of them a knock on the top of their head. "Go already,



we don't have all day." The shafts of light have dimmed, only giving off a faint, orange light.

"Alright." Kun sticks his hand into the pile and squeezes a handful of crystals, they immediately shatter into particles of light and get absorbed into his hand. He keeps on doing it for a while, when the pile shrinks to a few pieces left, both Rick and Bell dump more on the table. By the time Kun finished absorbing the majority of them, he has reached level 60.

\*chara chara\*

Everyone's announcement tab starts blinking accompanied with a chime.

**[Kun has become a ??????????]**

"EH?!" x2

"?"

"What the...? Status!"

Name	Kun (#1)	Race	Human
Alignment	None		
Level	1	Class	???/Novice
Guild	None		

Class Description	?b?e -o u?õ a p B?si? ?ier ?\i-ls. No st???? bo=-s aÓpi??s.		
Strength	11	Agility	13
Vitality	11	Dexterity	26
Intelligence	14	Wisdom	44
Charisma	10	Luck	10
Points Remaining			59

"It's all gibberish..."

"Check your skills."

"Skills!"

Available Skills:
+Novice
+Warrior
+Mage

+Archer  
+Craftsman

"Eh?" Kun is slightly stunned.

"Eh?" x2

"Eh?" Till looks at the three of them expectantly.

"I have access to all Basic class skills."

"That would be great... if we haven't learned how to control mana. So it's pretty much useless?" Bell puts her face in her paws.

"Meh, a secret class is still awesome. Now we have plausible deniability."

"Hmm... why didn't you take these crystals as well Kun-ni?"

"Um... I couldn't." Remaining on the tables are some pulsating yellow and orange crystals.

"Oh, those, I think they were from when the guards killed those bastards."

"So they were from NPCs? Hmm..." Bell turns around and spots the harpy-like student across the room. "Isnic, come here for a sec."

"Yes, Bell-sensei." Isnic gets up from the table and excuses herself from her fellow students.

"Isnic, try squeezing this." Bell hands her a yellow crystal.

"Yes, sensei." Isnic squeezes the crystal with her claw, shattering it. It

turns into particles of light before getting absorbed into her arm. "Eh? What's going on?!" She is covered in goosebumps with all her feathers standing straight up.

\*gishi gishi\*

Kun immediately gets a potion from his pack.

Isnic calms down, her feathers going back to normal. She clenches and unclenches her claws and inspects her wings. "I feel... stronger?"

"Eh? Can NPCs level up too?" Rick raises one of his brows.

"I guess?"

"It's only fair~"

"Um... thank you, Isnic, and eh, get everyone that's coming for the raid ready." The feathered demihuman nods at the felinoid before walking away. "We will figure this out later, we should get going."

\* \* \* \* \*

\*dokkan zuku zuku\*

"Nice, they are really going at it!" A smile spreads across Rick's face.

"Yep, we kept taking out the groups that were close to the Sardon borders, so now they are stuck in these two outposts across from each other. They have been at a stalemate fighting back and forth for a while." Bell is crawling on the floor, below the tall bushes, while

keeping an eye on both outposts.

"So what are we doing now?"

"We are going to end the stalemate."

"How?"

"Do you know why this place is called the Field of Ashes?"

"Eh... cause the ground is gray?"

"Not quite, when the dry season comes, everything here has a tendency to go up in flame."

"Okay... what does that have to do with anything?"

"It's almost the dry season now, oh, right, you haven't seen it in action before. Just wait for it."

\* \* \* \* \*

I look at the various groups of ant-like people, spotting the catapults that are moving toward one of the outposts. I turn to one of the other winged students, he holds up 4 fingers. There's 8 students here, including Isníc who is holding me at the moment.

"Kun-ni, they are about to launch the catapults, get ready."

I look toward the faint puddle-like reflection that's almost completely hidden in the bushes just slightly outside the field of battle.

"We are all set, just give us the signal."

\*kacha kacha kacha kacha\*

I can faintly hear the sound of the logs swinging.

"Now!"

\*dooooon dokkan dokkan\*

Flashes of light erupted from just outside the outpost, crumbling one section of the wall and leaving small craters in front of it. Fire spread in all direction, igniting the nearby bush and grass.

"Rick-ni, aim for the catapults."

"Holy! Did you see th. Ow! Right, catapults, tell Bell to stop hitting me already!"

I ignore their lover's quarrel since I already have my hands full. Con-juring gusts of wind, I fan the growing fires around the outpost toward the west and then finally the north, blocking off all but one direction of the outpost. I carefully control the wind as I watch the various swarms from the south forming into a snake as it slithers to the eastern side of the outpost. The 4 groups that were guarding the catapult have scattered, no doubt running from Rick-ni's arrows that caught them by surprise.

"Keep it up Rick-ni. Target the ones in the back."

As though on cue, the scattered ants in the south surged forward, soon joining the tail of the snake.

\*ga ga kan\*

I can hear the sound of metal striking metal as the two sides battle at the eastern gate of the outpost.

"Okay, Kun-ni, most of them are gathered up!"

\*BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU BOU\*

A long trail of large fireballs illuminates the night sky as though mini suns erupted from the ground.

\*DON DON DON DOKKAN DON DON DOKKAN DOKKAN DON DON DON DON DON DON\*

\*iyaaaaa\*

I shield my eyes as the rest of the students screech out in surprise, even though my arms blocked the light, I see a blinding whiteness.

\*shi\*

I can hear my clothing being ripped, suddenly, I am falling from the air. I release the wind that was fanning the flames and guide myself away from the battlefield. I have to make sure to launch myself up every now and then so that no one sees me from the ground. I focus on doing this for several minutes until I regain my eyesight, I then retreat to the hideout following the evacuation plan.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!"

"Shit!" Bell grabs Rick by the head and dives onto the floor. Flashes of white erupt from the direction of the damaged outpost.



## Failure/Success

"What the deus?! Everyone! Get behind me!"

I gather all the students into a crouching position before setting up walls of ice and earth between us and the fireballs.

\*DOOON riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii\* \*gara gara gara gara\*

There is a deafeningly loud explosion, leading to a constant ringing in my ear. I couldn't hear anything aside from a droning hum, but I can feel the earth rumbling continuously as each of the fireballs land.

*How the hell did it turn out like this?*

\*goaaaa\*

After the rumbling stopped, I release the walls which tumble onto the floor before disappearing. I turn to ask if everyone's alright, but I couldn't even hear myself talk. The three of them are giving me a mix of looks. I grab each of them and give them a quick inspection. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see that no one's hurt. I think Dosnak is in minor shock, but he seems to have snapped out of it after I grab him by the face and stare at him reassuringly. There's a mix of fear, shock, and something else I can't really determine in their eyes. Getting up rather unsteadily -did the explosions affect my inner ear as well?- I look in the direction of the outpost.

\*fyuuu\*

I nearly stumble from the wind that's trying to drag me forward. I feel

a chill down my spine with all my hair standing up on its end. Before me, a towering fire tornado dances within a crater where the outpost once was. I double check my stats and MP, there's no changes aside from my MP nearing zero. I can cast 13 fireballs with my current MP, but that doesn't explain the size nor destructive power from the ones just now.

One of the students tugs me by the sleeve, trying to get my attention. He's pointing toward the handful of people approaching the inferno from the south with his mole-like claws, probably the few defenders from within another outpost.

*This isn't what was planned... but... let's not waste this opportunity.*

I kneel down and grab the short student by the shoulders, I pointed at him and then the other two students in turn. Showing him a running motion with my fingers, I point toward the hideout where we have been staying. The boy nods and helps his fellow classmate up and evacuate, he turns back before pointing at me and then spreads his hand. Is he asking what I'm going to do? I point toward the approaching figures before I swing the finger across the front of my throat, he widens his eyes before nodding and resumes walking away. Will they be alright? They aren't walking in a straight line, but if it's the three of them, even wild beasts won't be a problem for them even if they are unsteady.

*First things first, how should I be hide these?*

I look at my surrounding, there are tall bushes everywhere with few paths. Since people normally wouldn't walk here anyways, I guess throwing the bag on the canopy should be enough.

\*kasa kasa kasa kasa\*

I tie an unfurled blue cloth to one of my packs and then throw most of my packs with anything of value onto the top of some bushes. Afterward, I fill some of my empty packs with branches and leaves.

The world has mostly stopped spinning, but I stare into the horizon to hopefully help me regain my balance. I guess this is as good a time as any... I am not quite sure if they will hear this, but they were further down, nearer to the other outpost, so they should be fine. "Bell-ne, I'm not sure if you can hear me, I can't hear anything for a while, so don't bother replying. I am going to gather whatever I can from the ruin and draw the survivors' attention and kill them off if I can. Use this time to finish off the people inside the Blades' outpost."

*Hmm... I should go for quick kills. So baton in front, shortsword in back this time.*

I walk toward the towering inferno while looking around continuously, I will have to rely on my sight to spot any enemies, best be cautious and avoid any potential ambush.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shit, there goes the plan for attrition." Bell and Rick had gotten up from the floor after the impromptu dive. Since there were many bushes and they were quite a bit away from the explosions, they didn't suffer any damage from debris or the shockwave that followed. They immediately tried to contact both Till and Kun, but only Till replied that she's on her way back to the hideout as planned.

"Can you get through to Kun, Rick." Bell is staring at the twisting flame further to the north-northwest where the other outpost used to be. Rick grabs her arm suddenly, causing her tail to stand straight up. "Wha-" Before she can say anything, Rick puts a finger to his lip and points at the shadows coming out from the remaining outpost. He silently picks up the longbow that had been flung to the floor and begins notching an arrow. This time it was Bell's turn to grab him by the arm.

She leans in and starts whispering in a soft voice, "Kun is still alive, can't hear anything though, he's going to buy us some time, told us to get in there and take care of the remaining users."

"Can we do it? There shouldn't be many left inside, but more might log in if the survivors manage to get a message out." He whispers just as quietly.

"Bring the bare minimum, we might die, but we will sure as hell make them pay." Bell silently activates «Metal Claws» and digs a hole, throwing all her non-essential items into it. Aside from a few potions and her armour, everything is inside. Rick follows by throwing in almost everything save for the long bow, a quiver of arrows, a harness of daggers and some potions. Just as silently, she fills the hole up. Cutting the back of her left paw lightly with her right, she drips a few drops of blood onto the ground to mark the spot.

It would be ideal for Rick to be in infiltration gear, but beggars can't be choosers. As such, Bell leads the way with her fur being changed to midnight blue with Rick trailing along about ten paces back. They make their way to the backgate of the outpost, about 2 dozen users came out from the front gate already. It's safe to say that they were either stupefied by the fire tornado or thought they had won the battle since they paid no attention to their surroundings.

The two reach the backgate without any incidents, Bell makes a gesture of getting on top of the wall and jumps up onto the rampart. Seeing the coast is clear, she tries to find a way for Rick to come up as well.

"Damn it, Cat Warrior is almost cheating, what's up with that jumping power." The youth complains while thinking of a way up. Thinking of the stupid things they have done, he remembers the pole licking incident. Smiling, he sticks a hand onto the wall and covers it with ice, reaching up with his other hand, he freezes it as well, then his feet follows soon after. He then releases the ice on the first hand, causing it to crack, fall off the wall and disappear before hitting the ground. Rotating the freezing and unfreezing in a cycle with his limbs to climb up, he repeats the process until he made it to the top.

Bell raises her eyebrows when he pulls himself over and stops tying the knots of cloth made out of flags that were planted on the rampart. She quickly nods her head toward one of the doors, although they don't have a blueprint for this outpost, her experience with raiding has given her a basic grasp of most fortifications in the region. Basically, sleeping quarters are always on the second floor.

\*kara\*

\*kan\*

"Shit! Tabeus was right!" A guard slashes at the door with his sword as soon as Bell opens it. She barely ducked in time, causing the guard to hit the metal brackets of the door.

"He-gu..."

A dagger with a silver sheen flies through the air, perfectly slicing into the guard's windpipe. The half-cat takes this chance to swing an up-percut with her left claw into the man's crotch before following up

with an overhand thrust into his throat with her right claw, effectively finishing him off.

\*Hiiiiii\*

There were 3 more guards placed in the quarters, one is a few paces away that the now dead guard was trying to talk to; who just screamed in an unmanly way. The pair of guards near the opposite of the room immediately place their right hands on their right ears, trying to get reinforcements.

Within a blink of an eye, Bell has gotten on all fours and leapt at the lone guard like a panther before several \*gokin\* sounds greet the room from his head and body.

\*fyu fyu\*

Two daggers fly from Rick's hands in the meantime, stabbing one in the throat and the other in the hand, effectively silencing their communication. The man slumps onto the floor holding his throat while the woman yanks the wooden knife, that somehow stabbed through her hand, out.

"Intruders! Everyone get over here!" The lone guard that can still speak yells for help.

\*tatatatata\*

"You morons are going to regret messing with us." The remaining female guard has a nasty smirk on her face, ignoring her guildmate next to her. Running footsteps can be heard coming from down below.

"Shut her up and go lock the doors!" The felinoid goes from midnight

blue back into its red colour, giving up on any pretense of stealth.

\*DON GAAASHA"

She runs toward the bed nearest to the stairs, stabs the sleeping users in the throat and throws the bunk bed in the direction of the stairs. The sleeping quarter is one huge room easily 30 meters squared, they must have knocked out some walls to make it into a giant barracks.

The woman drops her smirk when she sees the raw strength of the cat-woman and tries to open the door she and her partner were guarding. Unexpectedly, the man on the floor grabs onto her leg, pleading for help with his eyes.

\*doka doka doka\*

The woman gives the man several heavy stomps and tries to exit in a hurry, but Rick had already taken the chance to close up onto her. "«Antipode»!" With a quick series of strikes, the youth both freezes and burns the woman with his green aura, imbued daggers. Technically speaking, the woman is at a higher level than Rick. But with the combination of fear, distraction and Rick learning that level isn't everything from the Feian guards, he dispatches her with ease.

"Man, why are all the chicks in this game so violent." He quickly ends the stomped guard's misery.

Grabbing a nearby chair, he jams the door before freezing it. He does the same to the door where they entered from, before running off and sealing the other doors.

\*GAAASHA\*

Bell throws another bed at the stairs where a guard was brave enough to stick his head out of the bend.

"What should I do now?!"

"Start killing everyone in here! Don't worry about the loot, use the crystals right away!"

"Everyone? Shit!" Enchanting another pair of daggers with the metal attribute, the blonde youth starts slitting all the throats of the sleeping users and shatters the resulting crystals. Since all the forces of the [Monochrome Blades] have gathered their force into the outpost, there should be hundreds if not several thousands of users. Considering that the majority of them likely died in those fireballs, including the logged out users, there shouldn't be more than a few hundred combined in the entire outpost.

\*dota\*

Bell throws another bed into the staircase, but an earthen wall had sprang up, absorbing its impact.

"Shit, they got a mage."

\*fyu\*

A dagger flies across the room, planting itself to the hilt in a user's temple. "Shit! Some of them are logging in too!"

"Son of a... okay, you know what? Find the officer room and try and steal everything of value, there should be some bags in the room. Also, kill that son of a bitch." Remembering the betrayal has her blood boiling.



"On it!"

\*bou bou\*

Bell sets a bunk bed on fire and throws it at the entrance of the stairs. She repeats this to make a flaming barricade.

Rick dashes off to the door with the fancy handle, removes the chair and unseals the door. Slamming the door open, he sees several large chests locked with series of massive padlocks, various weapons mounted on the wall or set into stands, and the hated Keely sleeping on the large, ornate bed.

\*guku\*

Making quick work of the massive locks by rapidly applying ice and fire mana directly onto it, he pops the chests open with ease. The youth swallows hard as he stares at the sheer amount of gold, silver and gems before his eyes.

\*shara shara\*

He rummages through the dressers and cabinet, finally finding some backpacks and bags.

"Damn bastard, just how many rare equipments do you need. Hm... actually..."

\*ka ka ka\*

Rick strips the man covered in plate armour and stores everything into one of the backpacks.

\*sha sha ki kiko\*

The youth grabs some ropes and a bunch of lower class weapons and tied them elaborately onto the ceiling above the sleeping man and beside the bed. He then attaches the ropes to the sleeping figure. Satisfied, he starts looting up the place.

\*chiin chiin chiin\*

Into two bags, he fills it with all the gems, various scrolls, every piece of visible jewelry, and a few handfuls of gold coins. Taking all the gold would be ideal, but the sheer weight will be troublesome, especially with the set of plate armour.

Grabbing one more backpack, he stuffs it with expensive looking weapons after coating it with a thin sheet of ice. Quickly moving the 4 bags out of the door, he piles the remaining silver, gold, and equipment at the door and sets it on fire before exiting.

\*goin basha don da da don gasha\*

Upon exiting the room, Rick sees Bell fighting a swordsman and throwing random things at the staircase while covered in blood. There are some bodies strewn all over the floor, seems like she had been busy. While looking around, he can see several more users trying to get up.

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

He releases a barrage of arrows, completely emptying his quiver. Although it wouldn't be enough to kill most of them, it would be enough to slow them down.

\*kan\*

"Let's get out of here!" The youth abandons his bow and slips on a backpack.

\*Finally! «Elemental Dance»!" The busty felineid stops throwing bunk beds and focuses on the user in front of her, unleashing a flurry of blows. Most of the strikes were blocked with the swordsman's shield, a few strikes land cleanly, stunning him. Taking this chance, Bell runs to the bags, slips a backpack on and grabs the two bags on the floor with her retracted claws. The two run toward one of the doors away from the staircase.

\*DON DOKKAN\*

The outpost shakes violently following the sound of explosions.

# Success/Failure

I change my gear to those that'd been worn by [Monochrome Blades] members as I go around looting the bodies and shattering crystals along the eastern edge of the former outpost. I grab one of the smallest, high quality mantles and wear it to hopefully confuse any survivors. Embroidered with a crossed pair of dao, vertically divided in half, the left has a white background with parts of the swords in black; on the right, it has a black background with the parts of the swords in white. I am also wearing a hood and veil that I found among the bodies, it might be hot and uncomfortable, but I'd rather remain anonymous for the time being if I can.

Taking a clearer look at the [Monochrome Blades]' emblem, I seriously think they need a new designer, but at least it's better than [Dawn's Moonlight]'s emblem. A full moon on a black background with the initials of the guild overlapping the image, saying "Bright Moon".

Emblems aside, there are unsurprisingly few survivors. There's about a handful of them, moaning and groaning. I deal with them one by one, no doubt they are high level users that are in critical condition, which I take care of by slashing along their throat. I notice one of the bodies starts standing up three dozen or so paces away on the right. It's a good thing I am keeping an eye out, since I would have never hear him coming. I'm pretty sure the fire's making a hell of a lot of noise as well, I can feel the ember crackling and rubble popping even if I can't hear it.

He makes an intense stance and looks to be screaming something — would it be loud enough to draw more attention? I look at the people approaching from the south, unexpectedly, they are still coming at a

slow pace. — I guess the roaring fire must be overpowering his shout, not that I can hear him anyways.

I'm not sure what class he is, but he likely has the «Second Wind» passive skill that allows him to temporarily ignore his critical status. Brandishing his swords, he stops his screaming pose and rushes toward me. I ready a rod and high quality steel shortsword I looted from the bodies previously, preparing for a counter. I don't have the luxury of a drawn out battle, and he's already critically injured. I'm confident I can take him down even if he's twice my level, it seems the vast majority of users are under the impression that DPS, raw stats and equipment quality determines how powerful they are. I honestly think they are spewing nonsense, in a fight, all you need to do is to kill your enemy completely, even a bear will die if you manage to stab its vitals.

Shaking my head to clear out the useless thoughts, I crouch even lower, turning my body into a spring. He extend his leading sword overhead, revealing his full height, I am about to jump up at him when he unexpectedly starts going backwards. With a panicked and confused expression, he ends up being sucked into the fire tornado. That's when I realized I really should hurry up and continued to stay low on the ground as I go about looting, replacing the junk I've stuffed in my bags as I go along.

Users' body have a fixed expiry period of about 10 minutes. Once that time pass, the body fades away, leaving behind random items from the users' inventory. I was only able to take some weapons and jewelries away for the minute or so I had with the bodies, of course shattering crystals as I went along. It's regrettable that I had only managed to get to rummage through about a dozen bodies, but I had to make the necessary preparation since I could very well end up killed if I was not careful. The not-a-fight also took about a minute, cutting into the time even more. Still, I was able to kill some high level users and I can

completely strip them of everything on their bodies. Well, save for the one that flew off. I shudder a little, thinking about if I had leapt up with my counter.

The distance between the two outposts is about 2 kilometers, since the ones approaching are likely wary and in shock, they are merely at the halfway mark. I am surprised they haven't spotted me yet, but I probably am not even in their field of sight, not with the inferno blazing like that.

One of the almost naked bodys -that I stripped- is starting to fade away, so about 17 minutes or so must have passed since I last launched the «Fireball»s. From their position, Bell and Rick would need about 20 to 30 minutes to reach the other outpost discreetly, assuming Rick doesn't get caught or something.

*How am I going to cause a distraction...*

I start running off at full strength to where we were hiding to drop off the loot as I go through my options. Throwing the ladened bags at the bush canopy where I kept the rest of my gear, I start taking some deep breaths. I feel stupid as I look at the towering flames, I wonder if this is how Rick feels most of the time.

There are about 20 users at the edge of a wall of fire burning to the south of the inferno, picking up loot left behind. A few of them stare at the flame, looking upward. Unexpectedly, they all stop what they are doing and start running back. Not good, the two probably got noticed. I'm not sure about this, but I guess I really don't have a choice at this point. I run back toward the inferno with nothing save for the armour I'd looted.

Slightly out of breath, I start forming the formula Bell had shown me

for her «Chorus Strike» and combined it with aspects of my «Stardust», changing bits and pieces of it. Although I can cast two «Fireballs» with my recovered MP, I might accidentally kill the two of them as well, so I have to cause enough damage to draw attention without annihilating the remaining outpost.

Anchoring myself in a low stance, I stretch my arms out in front of me, spreading my fingers. Using the triangle naturally formed by my thumbs and index fingers, I use it to frame the northwestern rampart of the remaining outpost. The pose really serves no purpose, but it helps with my concentration, and it had helped me more than once when I was hunting, so I might as well use it.

I was experimenting with using the [Mage]'s «Fireball» from my new skill list with an expanded version of Bell's «Chorus Strike». Since I no longer have to do the formula for «Fireball», I tried adding additional parts to «Chorus Strike» to convert mana more efficiently and tried to remove the size limit. In short, I was trying to make a «Spell Amplifier» by using mana from the environment. It doesn't make sense that the «Fireball»s grew to that size, but I will worry about that later. Since I won't be using a «Skill» from my skill list, I can't use «Spell Amplifier», but I can still use the principles behind it.

*Here goes!*

From the inferno behind me, a small ball of fire spirals into the sky before flying toward a spot above where I was aiming. Adjusting and stabilizing the focal point, I release the entirety of the spell. Using the abundant flame behind me, I am forming a fireball to drop onto the rampart from the sky, causing the majority of damage to go into the ground and limiting collateral damage. It is unlikely the two of them will be in that part of the outpost, so they should be safe. Since I'm mostly just transferring mana instead of casting a whole new spell, I

can do massive amounts of damage with my current amount of MP.

I can see a steady stream of small balls of fire flying toward the first ball that's hovering about. The numbers of them are steadily increasing as my MP trickles down. Unexpectedly, I can feel a force trying to drag me off my feet.

*Oh shit!*

I complete the «Spell» so that it would keep going without me as I become airborne. I desperately try to contact Bell, but I can't even breathe, let alone talk. Before I can make a proper connection, the large stream of fire consumes me, burning me completely.

*[Personal Note: I was getting an image of the firenado tilting sideways spewing a bunch of small, twirling balls of fire to toward the beacon fireball before he got sucked in o.O]*

It is surprisingly painful, I'm surprised at the amount of the details they put into this. The scenery went from the night landscape, into a fiery orange glow before fading into darkness in mere moments. The next thing I know, I am sitting straight up from the bed covered in cold sweat.

Wiping my forehead, I head toward the console. That was a total miscalculation! I knew about the fire tornado sucking things in, how can I not know that what I was doing will enhance its effect?! While berating myself, I leave a detailed message to all three of them describing what happened via the console. Till should be fine since she would be on her way back to the hideout if she followed the plan, I just hope the two of them manage to get out alive.



# Surprise

\*gaoooo\*

The wall on the opposite side of the large room reveals a peek of the glowing night sky. To be exact, the night sky is illuminated and the slowly melting masonry is just revealing the scene as though it's a cinematic. It would be amazing if the heat isn't so intense that they feel like they are being roasted.

"God damn it, is Kun sending fireballs our way?"

"It's one hell of a distraction in any case, let's go!" Not bothering to unlock the door, Bell sends two slicing kicks at the hinges of the door before completely kicking it out of the brackets.

"Nya!" There is some resistance, so she adds another kick to get it out of the way. Running out with a bag in each hand, she runs out onto the rampart and jumps off the eastern wall after a cursory glance.

\*tatadadatata\* \*ufuu\*

"Wait! What about me?!" Rick follows right after, stepping on the unevenly laid door on the floor while ignoring the miserable sound escaping from under the door.

"Just jump! I'll catch you!"

Looking over the rampart, the youth is looking down at the felinoid below, with two bags on the floor and her arm outstretched.

"Are you sure?" The blonde youth looks back at the door and sets it on fire with «Flame».

"Yes! Or I'll leave you up there!"

Taking a quick look into the room where they were a moment ago, Rick jumps down, he doesn't want to be there when the ones logging in stampede out of there.

\*BASHI\*

"Nya!" The catwoman catches the youth with ease, grabbing him by the torso to redirect his momentum and absorbing the shock with her entire body by lowering herself. Using her shoulder as a pivot, she lobs him onto her shoulder as support with the changed momentum. She dumps him onto the ground on one side afterward like a sack of potatoes.

"I swear your class is just unfair."

"Or you are just weak, now move it!"

\*kasa kasa pafyu\*

The two run with all their might all the way into the bushes to the east of the outpost. Rick collapses on the floor breathing heavily while Bell leans forward and rests her paws on her knees after dropping the two bags with a loud \*zudo\*. The two are feeling heavy, no doubt crashing from the surge of adrenaline that had kicked in when they were inside.

"Eh?"

"What's up?"

The youth's question hangs in the air, with no answers forthcoming. He just keeps resting like that.

"Eh? Really? It can be done like that? Oh... my..."

"What?"

Bell spreads her paws toward the two dancing flames to the west. Rick, not sure what's happening, got up with some efforts and whistles appreciatively at the scene. A fire tornado is sending its whirling flame into the sky where the fireballs were, while a massive fire burns at the outpost they were at. They can't see it clearly since it's on the opposite side of the outpost from where they are standing, but they know it's intense since the wooden gate at the front is burning and the stones have a silhouette of melting ice cream on a hot day.

"Did Kun do that...?"

"Yes... and I'm going to see if I can do the same." There is a really sharp glint in her almond-like eyes as she stares into burning fires. "Hide the loot and yourself, if you think you are up for it, sneak around the place and see if you can snipe some people off." With that, she sprints toward to the fire tornado on all fours after dropping the backpack.

"Wait! Where are you go-" The cheetah-like dashing figure can no longer be seen from the bush.

\*funyu\*

Rick simply sighs and gives himself a stretch, although she said to hide them, how on earth is he supposed to move all these bags by himself?

Resigning himself to playing guard duty, he starts checking the loot, finally noticing the blinking icon for an external message. "Oh, Kun sent a message."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Damn it, why isn't it working?!" I am standing outside the edge of the fire tornado's influence, I intend to keep a close eye on the wind to prevent myself from getting into a position where I would be sucked in.

I'd been trying various «Spell»s only to have it fizzle one after another.

What's different from when Kun did it? Let's see. The fireballs were cast by him, so the resulting mana can be counted as his... but he was forcefully logged out and his spells have ended, so why is there a fire devil remaining here?

I begin to break down the sequence in my head like the way Kun explained before. [Source] + [Conversion] + [Action]. The [Source] is the fire tornado, there is no [Conversion] since I'm keeping the the Fire mana as is, [Action] is merely to send a ball of Fire mana flying forward.

*Right, I need to make the Fire mana as mine, but I'd need to convert to Light mana first... but I don't have enough mana to even start the conversion process. The fire devil is here because Kun's spell caused a natural phenomena that persists after the spell itself is gone... then... can't I have the process in a different order?*

I think back on all the experiments I completed throughout the years,

the physics classes, the various demonstrations. The problem with explosives in our world was due to the Aurora causing an ionization of the area, leading to oxidation of volatile chemicals. But what happens when you have a fuel that's under pressure releasing into an environment? What about dust explosions? Hmm... right, let's do it this way!

Lighting a match by using a flamethrower, there's nothing stopping someone from using the match to light another fire. With the idea set in my head, I go around gathering burnable material, fortunately Kun left them all over the place as he was looting. Was he planning on detonating himself if he was going to be killed? I can't really understand that man sometimes. I pack a handful of leaves and broken branches roughly into a ball the size of my paw and cast a modified «Entomb» on it. Using the minimal mana, I make it a hollow, airtight shell to hold the material, imbuing it with a homing [Action] targeting the general area of the other outpost. Satisfied with the general shape, I lob the ball into the direction of the fire tornado. It swirls in ever shrinking circles before reaching the center, glowing red hot from the intense heat, I then release the spell.

Aided by the fire tornado's hot, rising air, the ball of glowing earth arcs in the night sky.

\*don\*

Unexpectedly, it explodes while mid-air.

"Holy shit, was that you Bell?"

Reaching for her ear with her right hand, "Yeah, that was me, trying to get it working right now."

"Okay, try and aim for the back, they have several mages trying to

block off the fire so they can rescue their guildmates and valuables. They are pretty much exposed if they are attacked again."

Wait... that actually makes sense. Guess even an idiot can come up with a decent plan sometimes.

"What have you done to Rick? How do you know this?"

"Ha! Jokes aside, I snuck back after throwing the bags on top of the bushes, the same way Kun did."

Hm... yeah, that would indeed be best if we are short on time, only someone from the air can spot it easily, to spot it from the ground is another story.

"Okay, be careful."

"hehehehehe, don't worry, I found something awesome from the weapons we stole."

He really needs to fix that laugh of his, his normal laugh is fine, but that... creepiness when he finds a new toy hasn't changed.

I quickly make another ball, with a thicker, stronger outer shell with the «Entomb» and repeat the launch. The earthen ball explodes on impact, ending up with a fiery explosion before extinguishing. Unfortunately, it was about a hundred meters short.

*[Personal note: Using a fire tornado as a makeshift mortar launcher... wtf Bell. And he isn't the only creepy one with new toys -\_-;]*

I start making several more balls in a similar manner, but pumping in

a bit more MP for the additional distance needed for the homing factor. Launching one in the air, it flies toward the outpost with a beautiful arc before landing somewhere on it.

\*don\*

*Yes!*

It isn't anywhere as destructive as Kun's, but I'm using a fraction of the total MP he did. Since I've a smaller mana pool, I should focus on efficiency instead.

"Aim for the southeast wall, I'm pinning them down there. Seems like they are sending a team to check on you."

I quickly throw 4 balls into the fire tornado after adding a touch more mana into them.

\*don don don don\*

"More! Send some to the back too!"

I start following his instructions, I can't see anything aside from the impact from my position, so I'll just have to believe in his judgement.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*shi\*

I release all my spells that are currently in use. The thin sheet of ice covering all the weapons shatters before fading away. Going through

them, I see a shabby looking pair of metal daggers attached together. I intend to throw them away, something seems off about it. Picking them up, I realize they aren't daggers at all. Swinging the second half silently into its upright position, it looks like an unstrung bow, albeit a really small one.

I look around the bag, but there doesn't seem to be anything like a bowstring. I turn the bow-like object around, but there doesn't seem to be any notch for the string in the first place. I grab it by one of its horns to collapse it, unexpectedly, a faint string appears, catching onto my finger. Looking at it closely, there even seems to be a faint, transparent arrow notched. Intrigued, I pick up the bow and test fire it.

\*pyu\*

A bit of earth flies in the air as the projectile bites into the ground. Walking up to the point of impact, I can't find a trace of the projectile although I can somewhat see the small hole in the dark. I take another shot, a small one, into the sky.

\*pyu\*

Another bit of earth jumps into the air. Walking up to it, the hole is closer to a vertical position, but I still don't see the projectile.

*Where did it go? Hmm... I know!*

I ready another shot, but coating the arrow with the ice attribute, and send it on a small arc.

\*pyu\*

There's no piece of earth flying, but I can see the shimmer from the ice



reflecting the faint orange light from the burning flames. Walking up, I'm shocked to find there is still no trace of a projectile, save for the coating of ice that embedded itself into the ground.

Eh?! EHHHH?!!!!!!

Invisible arrows?! This is awesome! I feel giddy for some reason, is this the reason why Bell's always trying to find something new? Poor Kun has to put up with her incessant theories all the time.

I collapse the bow and strap it to one of the loops of my harness. Copying Kun, I unfurl a robe and tie it to one bag, then chuck them onto the top of the bush. I toss the other bags near it, effectively hiding it. I start running back to the outpost right after, I can kill those bastards without getting caught if I play my hand right.

Man, Kun thinks up the strangest things on the spot and they freaking work too. He really is something. How many new spells did that guy make? It's no wonder that Bell has been in such a good mood lately. Just reading what he did already made me shiver, using a fire tornado to power another spell? He didn't even get to finish high school right? This is a sad waste of talent!

I reflect upon my own situation, being the only child, spoiled by my high-ranking parents since I was young. If Bell and her family hadn't showed up, what kind of entitled brat would I have become? Would I have become a playboy, using my shoulder injury as a crutch? I shudder at the possible me that would exist now if I wasn't set straight at the time. Now that I graduated from high school, I don't even know what I'm going to do. I said I'm taking a year off to find myself, but I already know I'm an idiot. Simply put, I'm not all that smart, all I have going for me is my good looks, connections, and physical abilities. Now that my shoulder is healed, can't I train and try again? I probably

won't be selected or even given a scholarship, but I am sure I will still be above average. The reason why I moved out was to learn some independence, hmm... maybe I should learn to how to cook as well...

\*don\*

While I'm deep in thought, jogging silently, I hear an explosion up in the air. I send a message asking Bell if it was her. There's no one I can think of that would be capable of exploding anything in the sky at the moment.

Huh, so it was her. Looking at the outpost, it seems they've put out the fire I set on that door and they have a line of people going all the way to the back gate on the ramparts, relaying material out of the room. It also looks like an Earthen Wall is popping in and out of existence, I guess they are trying to contain the fire while bringing everything out? I let Bell know of the situation, before heading off.

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

I maintain my distance and fire off some «Trick Shot»s over the line of people and have the arrow fly back from the west, making it seems as though they are being attacked from that side. I staggered my shots so that it looks like it's fired as a volley from a group.

\*don\*

I hear the sound of an explosion, but it didn't seem to do any damage to the outpost.

"@#\$, we are under attack from the west! How many of these #\$\$^&ers are there?!"

"Shit! Where are the leaders?"

"Tabeus got killed at the other outpost! Keely got skewered when he logged in!"

I can't help but smile at that last comment, there's nothing quite like a plan going exactly the way you intended.

"We are on our own then?"

"Yes! Everyone, get over here and shield yourself with the wall!"

"Yes sir!"

\*don\*

An explosion rattles the top of the outpost.

*Nicccccceeeeeee!*

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

"Damn it! Siska, bring a third of the team to the west to deal with the archers! Wang, take a third of the team and go catch whoever is launching that shit at us! I will keep try to keep the evacuation going!"

I launch another series of «Trick Shot»s before asking for some support from Bell. The team going to the west isn't going to be an issue, if anything, it will help us along, so I leave them be. But I can't let the other two teams do what they want.

\*pipipipipipipi\*

I use «Rapid Fire» as cover fire to hold the other two teams in position.

\*don don don don\*

"Ah!"

"Wh-!"

"Help.."

"Shit! Go around the back!"

About a quarter of them got swallowed by the explosion, they didn't all die, but I used the explosion as cover and help them logout with a barrage of arrows via «Rain of Arrows».

Not needing arrows is freaking awesome! Till won't have to help me pick up arrows anymore with this!

"More! Send some to the back too!" I give Bell another PM. This continues for several more rounds, them being restricted by my invisible arrows, Bell sending rounds of exploding balls and then me finishing off those that were caught in the explosions.

"Sorry! But I don't want to die! I'm getting out of here!"

"Me too!"

"Wait!"

"Sorry, there's no leaders here, and we are just sitting ducks!"

"Alright, full retreat, let's get out of this hell hole!"

I continue to send waves of arrow at them, picking them off here and there.

"You damn cowards! We will get you for thi-"

I send a stream of metal attribute arrows that strikes the man from several different directions, shutting him up.

"eiiaiiii!"

The rest of the group runs to the south, soon after, some people start to leave the room. Some of them are moving slowly, carrying some

bags. They are probably the mages and trying to take some valuables with them.

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

I send another barrage of «Trick Shot»s before using «Aimed Shot» to nail one of the bigger silhouettes carrying one of the bags. The rest of them drop everything before running south too.

"Um... Bell, you can come back now, they've all retreated."

"huh..."

"Bell? You there?"

"Yeah... I'm just overwhelmed."

"By what?"

"By what you ask? You do realized we somehow managed to destroy 2 guilds right? That's several thousand users, there were only four of us."

"Oh... I'll... damn..."

I'm overwhelmed too. I didn't realize it due to all the excitement. But wow... we actually did that, didn't we?

"I'm going to get Till to bring some porters, it's not like we can carry everything back with us."

"You know what, get Till to go to Orllewinwell and ask for the Feian captain and get him to send what he can, just tell them I asked."

"Will they come?"

"Trust me."

"Alright."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bell and Rick had stood guard for 2 more hours, just talking away before Bell logged off.

Rick stayed behind, thinking about his own affairs as he waited for reinforcements. The roads are there, but it will take at least until noon before they reach here. But that's fine, it's not like there's anything pressing he'd need to do anyways. He immersed himself within his thoughts as time trickles by.

It is a pleasant surprise when Till shows up with a group of students landing in a small clearing in the bushes. They walk toward Rick bearing some food, drinks, and cloth. It's a surreal scene, Isn't in particular is in awe and nearly drops everything she is carrying. The entire group of students keep looking at the two of them before looking back at the scene of destruction, especially at the still burning fire tornado. They had landed to avoid getting accidentally dragged in by it just a moment ago. It is almost like watching synchronized swimming, with demihumans and elegant gestures replaced with turning, tilting heads.

"Are senseis heroes or devils?" One of the younger crow-like demihumans asks no one in particular, tilting its head.

"Hmm... I guess you can say we are devils to bad immortals?" Rick

smiles before giving a quick rustle on its head.

"But doesn't that make you heroes?" The crow-like one continues. They had seen the size of the armies fighting when they were ferrying the 3 non-flyers, it's by no means a big battle of some war, but to those that haven't been outside of their forest home, it might as well be one.

"Of course they are heroes! Headmistress trusted them after all!" A demihuman with bat wings interjects, with the others nodding in approval.

"Sh... let's set up the cloth and wait, Rick-sensei should be a little hungry."

"Yes big sis!"

The entire group works in unison, setting up a makeshift picnic area. It is an odd scene, young ones picnicking with an older youth, surrounded by a scene of burning ruins. Nearby, an unmoving felinoid sleeping with a content face.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had set out as soon as they received a message from a tiny girl that dropped from the air. Had it been anyone else, they would have waited until daybreak, but since it was Rick, they held some expectations.

But none of them expected the utter destruction before their eyes. A supposed outpost is now cratered, another is missing a good chunk of its masonry. The still burning fire tornado is making them gulp and

look up, they've heard tales of these fire devils that are several meters tall. This one is practically trying to reach for the sky.

Till had to extinguish the fire tornado with «Air Hammer» and «Downburst» since using water would just make acid rain. This snapped them out of it, the captain soon starts dividing them into teams and gets them into the action of loading the loot.

\*hihiiiiin\*

\*zun zun dottaa\*

Horses are whining as guards start filling up the wagon with the various loot. The scar-covered captain walks toward the odd group that's enjoying a picnic. Rick gives him the usual salute with two fingers before offering the man some tea and trail mix. The man gladly takes a cup and takes a small, sticky cluster of trail mix. He had some of the sharp, citrus-like tea before when he dropped by the academy with Rick en route to **Ashentor**. The trail mix is something new, he takes a bite and is pleasantly surprised by the texture and crunch, it goes perfectly with the tea.

"So... what happened here?" The captain is curious; who wouldn't be after seeing this scene.

"The senseis took care of the bad immortals!"

"Yeah, there was this DON explosion last night that lit up the sky."

\*kon kon\*

Till give each of them a chop on the head, "keep eating and let us do the talking, okay?"

"You shouldn't pick up Bell's bad habits you know?"



"I don't think you have the right to say that Rick-ni." Till gives the youth a sad look before turning back to the captain.

\*goho\*

The captain chokes and coughs a bit before drinking some tea.

"We took care of the immortals, that's all."

He looks at Rick, who tilts his hands back and forth before shrugging and giving a nod with a smirk on his face.

"Hnn...!" Rick stands up and stretches a little. "Come on Till, let's grab the loot on the bushes before logging out, we have been logged in too long."

"We already got them in a pile... but you've a point."

"Captain, please bring us back to your barrack, you can just leave us in the carriage. We should be safe in your hands." Rick is also pointing at the cat-thing behind him with his thumb.

The captain shows a complicated expression as though he wants to talk some more, but there's no point in stalling them when they are this tired. They can always talk when they come back. He nods before pointing at one of the caravans. "You guys can go rest in that caravan, I will make sure you folks get back safely."

"Thanks cap'n, you the best." Rick gives the man a clap on his shoulder while Till gives him a short bow. The youth drags the unresisting feline onto his shoulders before heading to the caravan, with the aquamarine-haired girl right behind.

"The Fertility God, The Little Witch, The Cat Amazon huh, wonder where's the fourth one."

# Unexpected Outcome

"Good job Mak'ra, De'muel."

Bell is going through the parchments of records concerning the loot inside an officer's quarter in the **Orllewinwell** barracks lent to her by the guards. Bell, Rick, and Till were carried into the quarters while they were logged out. They would've been happy to wake up in the caravan, but it seems the captain wouldn't have any of it and said they should be treated as important guests and brought them here. Now Bell is reviewing their spoils of war with the help of 2 of the oldest students.

Till had sent a few students back to the Academy to get the "bagged traveller" group moving toward **Ashentor** when she went to deliver the message to the captain of the Feian guard. Mak'ra and De'muel were expressly transported to **Orllewinwell** to take an accurate inventory of their haul. Although they were slightly delayed since the fliers had to rest, they still managed to make it to the city before the Feian troops returned from the outpost. Isnic was already given all the instructions by Till, so there was no issue when the Feian met with them, aside from the curious glances from everyone.

"But what does this x next to the gold, silver and various equipment mean?"

"They are slightly damaged and will likely needed to be melted down or repaired."

Rick starts whistling and tries to walk away when he hears that.

"What did you do, Rick?"

The two look at their sensei curiously.

"Um... I... umm... might have tried to set them on fire when we were escaping." He has a sheepish look about him.

"You... tried to set metals on fire?"

"Yes...?" The youth scratches his cheek with a finger.

"Thank gods you are stupid, didn't you know metals don't burn? At least not with the usual fire. Well, thanks to that, we have-" Bell looks at the documents again "-2700 or so damaged gold, 4600 something damaged silver and a bunch of Magic class or up cloth armours. We might have to pay a fee to separate or reforge the gold and silver and repair the equipments, but it's still a small fortune."

"Wah?" He has a dumbfounded expression on his face.

\*pachi\*

The two students clap their hands. Their sensei's stupidity never ceases to amaze them, and there is really no insult or malice in their belief - they honestly think Rick's screw ups will somehow, someday, change the outcome for the better. The story of him fixing others' impotence is well known among the students, although they aren't old enough to start their own family, they know the importance of one's ability to leave behind offsprings.

"Your. screw up. saved us. alot. alot. alot of monies." Bell spells it out for him, emphasizing the words. "There's still the matters of the Feian guards and Sardon. But even if we give them a share for the guards'

assistance and Sardon some compensation for the damage we've caused, we are still making a killing. We are already swimming in monies from the stray loot, but that pile of treasure that you didn't destroy, that's icing on the cake."

"Actually, about that." Rick furrow his brows. "I think we should claim they provided us with support during the attack, or even as the main force."

The 3 demihumans looks on with interest, waiting for him to continue.

"I mean, if they find out that it was just us that took down their guilds, they wouldn't hesitate to hunt us down, even take over or burn down the academy if they learn about it."

"Wow... lightning does strike twice. Did you hit your head last night Rick? You are actually making sense." The other two are nodding as well. They've seen the foolish behaviours of their sensei, but they've also noticed that his intention is never malicious towards them. And when he does something, actually trying to do something, it makes one doubt reality. Rumours about the spars and hunts he had done in **Feia** had spread to them when the Feian guards dropped by on their way to **Ashentor**. If they didn't know their sensei personally, they would think it was a different person.

Rick shows a soft smile, having had some time to think for himself that night, he realized that even if he's stupid, there are still things he's capable of. Using Kun as a guide, he realized he's beyond lucky. If he keeps thinking that stupidity is what defines him, there'd be no future for himself. If he can't do it by himself, it doesn't mean he can't do it with others. Obliterating those two guilds was proof of that. As the saying goes, people can change like water can flow, even with approaching difficulties, it can be overcome if he has the resolve and

tenacity to plant himself firmly into the ground. This already happened once when Rick traveled with his diplomat parents to a far off country in South America and ended up living with Bell's family for a few years. This change in mindset allowed him to look at himself objectively, there are indeed things he's good at. Making friends, warding off jealous, petty bastards, understanding relations, and last but not least, his charisma. If he's too dumb to lead, then just be the figure-head to help the truly smart ones lead the way. "Hopefully I'll bring you a storm." He gives them a mischievous wink. "So, let's revise the payout a little, I'll go see if the captain and the guards will agree. Check if Till or Kun have any objection though."

*[Note1: The saying and the surrounding sentences have been modified to reflect the context better, the original is a lot shorter.]*

*Note2: "Lightning can strike twice" and "Hopefully I'll bring you a storm." is a play on word that I had to use with the english equivalent, let me know if you don't get it (I'll go with the original if too many ppl doesn't understand it, even if it's even more awkward/troublesome to read).]*

\* \* \* \* \*

\*don\*

Hmm... strange, what's different from now and two days ago?

I'm currently using «Spell Amplifier» and shooting «Fireball»s into the sky, but it is nowhere near as powerful as the ones from two days ago. The «Fireball»s do increase in size and strength, but it's only slightly more powerful than a normal one.

*I should save some MP just in case.*

I stop my experiment and decides to wait for Till. I've respawned somewhere in the [Field of Ashes], I can't see the outposts, but I can faintly see the hills to the east. Respawning can be dangerous since you won't know what situation you will appear in, it is not unheard of for people to respawn in an area that's filled with monsters and die again as a result. Lucky for me, I'm somewhat close to a fort that was reclaimed by **Sardon** when it was abandoned by [Dawn's Moonlight] to concentrate their force at the outpost. Till is currently on her way with some of our students, so I just have to stay put until they arrive.

A dead user will respawn tens of kilometers away from where they die, in a random direction away from everyone else. There is a limit of 3 Amoatlzan days before they can log in again, they will be completely locked out from the system for the 42 hours. The revived user will spawn with whatever gear they've left on them when they faded away, minus anything that was taken, destroyed or randomly dropped. Fortunately, I was mostly naked when I got sucked into the fire tornado, so I didn't lose anything of concern. But it seems all the equipments I had on me were burned after I died since I respawned naked save for the clothing that's part of my avatar. I also lost a chunk of experience, but that's to be expected.

"Kun, Rick and I are thinking about asking the Feian guards to take credit for the battle, got any objections?"

Lifting my hand to my right ear, "Not at all... actually, that's a good idea, but there's something else we will have to discuss."

"Eh? What's the matter?"

"We will talk when I get there, I think I see Till. See you in a bit."

"Okay, we will set things up on our end then."

A small white dot approaches from the east with several dots following it in the air. The dots in the air drop down to the white dot and they starts heading this way. It seems like I was spotted.

\*shi shi sha\*

The white furry blob... glides? and stops in front of me. I honestly don't know how it propels itself, I don't see anything resembling legs or limbs for that matter. According to Rick, it's unbelievably comfortable riding inside it, as long as you don't get slobbered that is.

"Kun-sensei."

"Kun-ni."

"Good work everyone." I take a look at the blob known as Sammy before giving it a pat. It flattens itself to let me hop on. Guess I won't have to ride on the inside.

"Were you fighting birds Kun-ni? We saw the fireballs from the a distance."

"Nah, I was just testing them out. Seems like the fireballs doesn't want to come out like it did during that battle."

"Hm... Bell-ne would know better than me, let's ask her when we get back." Till gives Sammy some rhythmic pats, it suddenly gets up and dashes to the east. The 4 student escorts are giving me side glances every now and then as they fly along us on the way back, I'm not quite



sure what to make of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you for real?" A blonde youth paces back and forth next to the table. A little girl and 3 demihumans are sitting on chairs while a young man is standing nearby.

"It's just rumours, but it's plausible. I've been keeping an eye on the forums and such since I couldn't log in."

"Well, our plan failed in the first place, this is somewhat within expectations. Nevertheless, it's troublesome. To think the guilds would disband and the remnants would form a new guild... But for the big guilds to take notice of the dungeon, I didn't see that coming."

"How about we just destroy what's attracting them~~?"

"... destroy the Barghest Dungeon?" Rick makes a complicated expression. "Is that even possible?"

"Actually... how about a cave in?"

"Will that work?" Kun can already imagine what Bell has in mind, but there are still some doubts. "What's stopping the others from digging out the entrance?"

"Did you forget where I'm working? There are multiple ways to make the entrance unusable. We can even make a back entrance for ourselves."

"Oh right! You are with that mining company! Wait... can we make one of those boring machines?!" The youth chirps in excitedly, he had seen one of these behemoths in a museum when he was young, he had always wanted to see one of them in action. Unfortunately, the lack of a reliable source of power that's both strong and stable enough have made those machines inoperable. That is, except for the ones in Antarctica and the Arctic due to the continuous sunlight during their respective Light season.

*[Note: Light season is referring to the season of 24/7 light particular to the polar regions. The opposite would be the Dark season where it's dark all day.]*

"No, but we can make a smaller version. It looks like it's a Karst system, but we can have Dosnak help us check it out. It should also suffer some sort of groundwater issues since it's in a swamp. We can create a few false entrances and fill them with carbon monoxide by setting fires in them."

*[Note: Karst topography is a landscape formed from the dissolution of soluble rocks such as limestone, dolomite, and gypsum. It is characterised by underground drainage systems with sinkholes, dolines, and caves. (Wikipedia) It wasn't fun looking this up since the chinese characters were written wrong by a few strokes =.=]*

"Will that even work? Does carbon monoxide even exist here?"

"De'muel, Mak'ra, are there any stories about miners dying mysteriously? And the rescuers dying as well?"

The two were listening attentively, even if they only understand part of the conversation. But in regards to stories, they've read and heard

plenty.

"I'm not sure about stories, but the headmistress did teach us not to sleep with a fire when deep inside a cave."

"Or inside a building without an opening."

"Yep~ that's also why the workshop was made the way it is with so many windows, we wanted to add a forge as well, but none of us know how to use one, so we just left it as it is."

Bell smiles. "Look like it is probably there. Any other problems you guys can think of?"

"Is it right though...? To be doing this?" Kun mumbles to himself. "No, wait, there are no rules we have to play by, and it's not like we are hurting anyone by sealing it off."

"Sensei, how will you cause the cave in though? Wouldn't it be crawling with immortals like yourselves?"

"We can just cause a commotion inside and cause a panic."

"Or we just randomly throw spells inside the dungeon~"

"Okay, this sounds like a plan. I will log out and get some blueprints ready, I will probably need you afterward Kun. Till and Rick, sort out the things in regards to the loot and the Feians. We will be short on time, the nearest big guilds would only need a week to reach us. Considering that we pretty much took both the Blades and Moonlight's funds, they will need a few days to regroup. The other users can't clear it anyhow, so it's a race against time."

Everyone in the room nods before heading off to do their own things.

\* \* \* \* \*

"«Ice Wall»! Everyone, get away while you still can!" A man in a magician's robe and hood is shouting loudly within the cavern.

"«Air Hammer»! Um, I don't think it will hold much longer! Eek!" A little girl in a witch costume is hammering away at the ink-like, black canines that had made it through before the «Ice Wall» came up.

"What's going on...?" A burly man inquires from another part of the cave. Surrounding him are 6 other members of his party, they are in here to do some leveling since the dungeon never runs out of monsters. Approaching the two, he laughs as he spots the half dozen or so [Shadowhound]s. "You two need some help?"

"What? No! Run away!"

"Ahahaha! There's nothing to be afraid of little lady, I'm not like that twig over there." The man points at the hooded man that's fending a hound off with his staff.

"«Entomb»! Run!" The hooded man encases the hound in front of him in stone before running toward the entrance, followed by the girl.

\*pa pa pa\*

The laughing man swats a few of the [Shadowhound]s around him, showing off his strength.

\*ka\*

"What are you doing, Ed?! Run!" One of the man's teammates came to check out what he was laughing about, then he spots the black shadows that are completely obscuring the view behind the wall of ice.

\*ka ka ka shin\*

The wall of ice cracks, allowing dozens of [Shadowhound]s to spill into the chamber. The laughing man's face pales and immediately starts to run.

"«Net Shot»!" One of the man's teammates shoots a large arrow with an attached container. A net of rope bursts forth from the container while in midflight, catching some of the hounds, temporary slowing the inky mass. Well, it slowed them down for a total of one second, barely enough time for the burly man to get away.

"Shit! What's going on?!" The burly man managed to reach his retreating team with the help of his teammate's stalling tactics. The group turns a bend, following the magicians, unfortunately, the one known as Ed steps on a piece of stone, falling face first into the wall.

The man turns and gives an "EEEEEEK!" as a [Shadowhound] aims for his face with its dark, opened maw.

"«Ice Wall»!"

"«Air Hammer»!"

A wall of ice forms at the smallest part of the bend in the cavern, once again blocking off the hounds. The one that's nearly on top of the man gets slammed into the side of the wall before shattering into particles of light. The stunned man held his helpless pose with both hands in

front of him.

"Move your lily ass Ed!" The [Trapsman] that shot the net is laying down some more traps and nets next to him. Seeing that he's safe, he flushes pink and gives his teammate a nod before running off.

They make their way to a large chamber with a dome ceiling, with connections to tunnels in all direction.

\*ta... ta... ta... ta.. tatatatatata\*

"Oh shit oh shit oh shit!"

"Oh my gods! Run!"

Out of another another tunnel, a dozen or so users came running out. The two groups look at each other with dumbfounded expressions for a moment.

"ta... ta... ta.. tatatata"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

A rugged looking youth with blonde hair runs by them as he runs in from another tunnel. Two dozen or so users follow right after.

\*uuuu\*

\*uuuuuuuuu\*

\*garuru\*

The [Shadowhound]'s growls emit from the tunnels.

"This way to the entrance! Hurry!"

The blonde youth runs toward the tunnel where the magicians are standing off. They all start running up the tunnel, ones that were already running continue to follow the youth. The ones that were dumbfounded quickly got their sense back and run after them, including the burly man.

"Hey! What happened?"

"I don't know! I heard that some party got wiped out, the lone survivor panicked and started running all over the place and ended up training all the mobs in the lower levels!"

"Can't we just defeat them? Think of the experience!"

"You do that! I don't want to die here, no way anyone can take down that many!"

*[Note: Training is referring to the method of aggroing (or drawing the attention) of monsters en mass, this is usually done as a method of baiting the enemies into massive AoE (area of effect) attacks.]*

The users are talking while running. It wasn't long before the light from the surface can be seen pouring from the entrance, the pillar of light looks almost divine in their situation.

"Hurry! We will try to hold them off!" The male magician readies his staff.

"Wait, I'll help too!"

"Me too!"

"«Ice Wall»!"

"«Fireball»!"

"«Firewall»!"

"«Icicle Squall»!"

The [Mage]s among the retreating users start casting spells toward the back of the tunnel, thinking that with a group of spells, they should be able to at least take down a majority of the hounds.

\*Shin\*

\*Bou\*

\*Hyuuuu\*

\*ka ka ka\*

\*dokan\*

"Wait... 'dokan'?" The users react with a confused look.

\*ga ga gau\*

The ceiling of the tunnel starts cracking.

"Who was the dumbass that blew up the ceiling?!"

"Why did you bloody attack at all?! Walling them off would have been fine!"

"It was free experience! Like you wouldn't have done the same if given the chance!"

"Shut up and RUN!"

The users are running straight out of the tunnel as the ceiling shakes, unbeknownst to them, the 2 magicians and blonde youth from before are nowhere to be seen.



# Kill

\*pi\*

"Are you sure this is the right way?"

"Don't worry, we mapped it out with Dosnak."

A group of five shadows is walking in a cavern, with specks of light sparsely lining the walls and ground. Unlike others that opted to use a torch or have the light source near the party, Bell modified Kun's «Stardust» into a lighting spell that spreads everywhere. The reasoning was simple, having the only source of light in a dark cave on them would just make them sitting ducks. By spreading the light in a wide area in a diffused form, they level the playing field. Kun is using a modified version of the archer's «Hawkeye». In addition to seeing into the distance, he's also lighting the spot up with persistent specks of light that follow his sight.

The cavern is located a kilometre or so east of the [Barghest Dungeon], still in the arid part of the [Field of Ashes]. Going on the hunch that all the caverns are either connected or close to each other, Bell had been examining the terrain with Dosnak while the others were doing different preparations. Dosnak would try to squeeze into the cracks in the ground from the surface, and if there's a cavern underneath, Bell, and occasionally Kun, would go be his bodyguard if it proves promising. This cave is the fruit of their labour.

"The air is fine now, we made some ventilation shafts and forced some air in. There's even water flowing from the direction of the dungeon, the speleothem here is a little unique since the cave is located

underground and not in a hill. But it shouldn't be a problem, just don't mistake the raft pools as floors and don't touch the frostworks, actually, just don't touch the walls in general."

*[Note: Speleothem is also known as cave formation, consisting dripstones, flowstone, cave crystals and so forth. The most commonly known ones are dripstones (stalactites and stalagmites) and cave crystals (geos).]*

*Rafts are calcite crystals are formed on the surface of quiet cavern pools.*

*Frostworks are needle-like growths on cavern walls.]*

\*pi\*

"Pretty~"

"Yeah, damn, this is awesome. Imagine having a restaurant in here."

"Are you hungry Rick-ni~?"

"Hm...? Rick-sensei is hungry?"

"No, why... wait, I'm not an animal."

"Eh? Rick's hungry already?" Bell gives a look over her shoulder.

\*fusa fusa\*

"No, ignore her." Rick is giving Till a nuggy while replying.

\*pi\*

The group chats idly as they tread in the cave, with Kun keeping a look out in the middle, Bell as the vanguard and the other two as the rear-guard. Normally, Kun would be in the back to prevent any sneak attacks, but he's in charge of recon at the moment, so they'd swapped places. Dosnak is with Kun, adjusting him whenever there's any obstacles in the way as he peers ahead.

"Who knew there's such a place underground?"

"Well, it's a given, since the [Barghest Dungeon] exists in a similar system and is close by. We were just lucky we had Dosnak to poke around so we didn't have to dig pointlessly."

Kun suddenly stops with one of his hands up, everyone freezes as he tries to look at something.

He gives a \*fu\* as he relaxes.

"Saw something?"

"Not sure, but if there was something, it's gone now."

\*pi\*

"How is our position? We should be nearby already." Bell is looking at one side of the cavern with interest.

A ball of light drifts from Kun to the walls, a little further back and higher up. "Damn it, we overshot it a little."

"Nah, we are fine." Rick pulls out a map he had bought for the dungeon. "See here, this part runs parallel to the tunnels here." He points at one of the numerous large corridors on the map. "I think Kun said he left the marker at the second bend?" The youth looks at Kun

expectantly, who gives a nod. "So if we just dig diagonally up from here, we'd end up this in part of the tunnel."

"Alright, let's go with that." Bell drops the large pack that she had been carrying, Dosnak joins in and lays out various tools that were wrapped tightly with cloth.

The other three gather around, looking at the various tools with curiosity.

"Normally, we would drill into the wall with a large diamond drill bit powered by a boring machine. And then mix a weak explosive compound on the spot, pour it into the hole and then set it off from a distance. But I'm going to be trying something different, put these on." Bell picks up some finely threaded cloth and hands them out to everyone. "Don't take it off no matter what. Till, please create a draft."

Grabbing a chisel and hammer from the laid out tools, Bell walks up to the wall as a light breeze stirs.

\*kaakaakaa\*

\*kan kan kan\*

Using the head of the hammer, she gently knocks the frostworks off the wall. Marking an X on several parts of the wall, she gets to work right away with Dosnak providing assistance. Making thirty pinky-sized holes slanted slightly downward, 3 columns of 6 holes, spaced 2 hands apart, the wall looks oddly like something one would use to keep track of scores in certain board games.

"Pins." Handing the hammer and chisel to Dosnak, Bell starts inserting plain looking wooden pins into the holes after squeezing them. After putting a pin into each hole, she fills them with water. "Okay Till,

focus the draft along the wall and guide it to the entrance. Everyone stand here to stay upwind." The group did as told, after checking that everything is in order. She turns back toward the hole-filled wall, "«Tri-Element Pulse»!"

\*shin\*

\*pi\*

"Hmm? Nothing is happening?"

"Look closer Rick-ni."

\*ka\*

"Ah!" x2

"Eh?"

A muffled sound of stone cracking echoes in the cavern as the water turns to ice and expands a little outside of the holes.

\*buo\*

\*ka kasha\*

A dim light like that from embers glow from the holes, the ice starts cracking before finally exploding with bursting steam.

\*biri\*

A flash of light like a blown fuse flickers from the holes, each of the holes are becoming noticeably larger.

---

\*shin\*

\*buo\*

\*biri\*

\*shin\*

\*buo\*

\*biri\*

...

\*pi\*

The group had watched initially with interest, but they got bored as time went on. Aside from Dosnak, the group started a mini-picnic, munching on various snacks that Kun was carrying.

\*ga ga gasa\*

The enlarged holes have spider cracks surrounding them, they finally merge together and the entire section gave way, collapsing onto the floor. Powders and chunks of limestone of various sizes crumble away. A sudden stronger gust of wind drags the dust cloud away from the group.

"Damn, that took longer than expected."

"bori bori gokun"

The others quickly finish chewing and swallow their food. Rick is the

first to finish, "yeah, longer than when you took that dump when yo-" \*pyu\* \*dan\* \*bata\* A piece of rock flies through the air and strikes him in the head, shutting him up and causing him to topple over from his sitting position.

Kun gets up and inspects the wall after handing the tired looking cat-woman a waterskin, who takes it thankfully. "What did you do here...?" Kun looks at the the pile of debris before peering into the meter-deep hole in the wall.

Bell stops drinking from the waterskin, "I was thinking of combining chemical and physical weathering to bore a hole. Lower chance of a cave-in since there wouldn't be any sudden physical stress like from digging."

"Chemical and physical weathering...?"

"Um..."

"Chemical weathering is when you've things in the environment reacting with each other, usually water and minerals. Physical weathering is um, um, like when you repeatedly do something and wear the object out. Right, Bell-ne~?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"But wouldn't the thermal shock also cause a cave in~?"

The felinoid does a double-take, "um, yes, it can happen, that's why I didn't really let the heat get too high."

"Hm... so you are using thermal expansion to cause cracks first, then induce carbonation by burning the wood and melting the ice. But why

electricity~?"

"You need oxygen to make carbon dioxide... wait, what grade are you in again?"

"Ohh! Eh, I think I'm in middle 2, eh.. grade 8?"

"Sorry to interrupt, but wouldn't it be faster if you just make the holes deeper Bell-ne?"

Kun couldn't really follow the conversation aside from the cave-in part, so he tries to think of a way to improve the situation instead.

"We don't have anything to make a deep hole." Bell points at the tools that Dosnak is taking care of.

"Why would we need tools for that?"

The catwoman's face falls into a deadpan expression, a \*pan\* follows as she smacks her paw into her forehead. "Right, what do you have in mind?"

"Can't I just push a stream of water into a hole, kind of like how a waterfall wears away a cliff?"

"Waterfall, why don't you just make a waterjet, Kun-ni~?"

"Water jet...?" Kun shows a questioning expression at Till.

*[Note: Till is saying waterjet, as in the water jet cutter, whereas Kun's like "what water, jet"?]*

\*PA\* \*pi pi pi pi\*



A loud smack echoes in the cavern, causing water droplets to fall rapidly somewhere nearby.

"Right! Nhya nhya nhya nhya!" The catwoman laughs with a fist in her paw. The toppled boulder stirs as the rest of the group looks at her. Grabbing the tools from Dosnak, she runs into the hole, Bell makes 5 rough holes making a square with a mark in its center. "Kun, set up a spell to shrink the output size and increase the speed for «Water Beads» aim slightly upward into the holes, use your «Homing Beacon» to guide your angle. I will give you the formula in a bit, just slightly different from your «Spell Amplifier». We will cut a square by connecting the outer 4 dots. Till, send «Water Beads» into Kun's spell when we are ready, we will take turns so we can rotate to regen our MP." \*doka\* She gives the lump on the floor a kick, "that includes you."

\* \* \* \* \*

\*supa\*

"Okay, that's the last of it. Let me finish this last bit here. «Tri-Element Pulse»!"

The group had rotated, with Kun and Bell using «Spell Modifier» while Rick and Till took turns using «Water Beads». The result was a stream of water about a millimeter across that sharply cuts into the limestone wall. The first cut ended up cutting all the way through the wall, into the other tunnel. There was a risk of someone discovering them, but considering that the upper level of the [Barghest Dungeon] was evacuated, the group continued their work. Within the hour, they

managed to cut a meter-wide, square block all the way to the other tunnel on 3 sides that's 8 meters deep. The bottom has been cut 3/4th of the way, leaving the center part intact; this was done to hold the block in place and to prevent it from sliding down toward the group.

Dosnak was looking at the group work with intense concentration before walking a little distance away and started to punch into the wall. If one pays attention, one would notice the numerous holes of varying depth and size displayed across its surface.

\*ga ga gan\*

"«Tri-Element Pulse»!"

\*ga ga gan\*

"«Tri-Element Pulse»!"

\*ga ga gan\*

Bell recklessly uses «Tri-Element Pulse» to break the limestone. Since the stone was cut from the wall, the threat of the ceiling collapsing from thermal shock drops. This is due to the fact that the stone would slide down before it gets the chance to transmit any major changes in temperature.

"This is awesome! Teach me how to do this spell later!" The revived Rick has been repeating that since he woke up and started helping them.

"You've been saying that for a while Rick-ni, it's studying you know~"

"I will learn it anyways!"

"Hmm... Why? I don't see what's so good about this aside from a good cutting tool." Kun is slightly baffled by his enthusiasm.

"Come on guys! We can make a water jetpack with this! We can fly on water!"

"Umm... I can sort of fly already, Rick-ni." Till gives Rick a look with half-closed eyes.

"The students can fly us around already..." Kun gives him a questioning look with a raised eyebrow.

"But you'd control this! And we will be FLYING, like \*byun\*, not \*hora\*."

*[Note: like \*fast\* and not \*glide\*/like \*zoom\* and not \*flutter\*  
]*

"Till, can you give me a hand here?"

"Sure thing, Bell-ne~"

"Actually... keep that thought Rick, we can probably do something. We will be glad to teach you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You sure you don't need an escort, Dosnak?"

"It's fine, the cavern looks to be safe and I can take care of myself.

Take care, senseis."

The translucent humanoid loses its shape, going into the hole before dragging a carefully crafted limestone cover over the hole that's 9 meters long. It was crafted while the group was making the hole, after Dosnak finished testing out his new technique.

"«Homing Beacon»!" Kun marks the cover, just in case.

"Good idea, «Homing Beacon»!" Rick marks the cover as well.

"Okay, you guys know the drill. Let's make a killing, stay close in case any of us need help." Bell gives a mischievous smile as Rick and Kun double-check their packs. Both of them give her a nod, "alright, let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Get your [Warp Scroll]s here! The entrance is being blocked by a cave-in! Get your [Warp Scroll]s here! One per customer, 3 gold a piece! Get it while supplies last!" A youth with a red bandana over his head is shouting in one of the few safe sections inside the lower section of the dungeon while walking around. Next to him is a lithe beast covered in green hair, following him, giving off the impression of a powerful bodyguard. Although it's called a safe section, it's merely where a large number of users gather to rest, should any monster show up, everyone will just gang up on it without regards to kill-stealing.

*[Note: In online games and especially first-person shooter games, MMORPGs and MUDs, **kill stealing** is the practice of*

*obtaining credit for killing an enemy, when another player has put more effort into the kill. An example is when a player in a first-person shooter whittles an enemy's health down and is about to kill them, when another player comes along and shoots that enemy once. The second player gets credit for the kill despite having done almost none of the work of killing that enemy. Kill stealing occurs when the rewards for defeating a foe are limited or highly desired, and many players are competing for that same reward. The term is most often heard in MMORPGs and MUDs, where rewards of items and experience points can be substantial, but can also be found in first-person shooters where players are rewarded a point for a kill. Many players feel that kill stealing is a dishonorable practice. (Wikipedia)]*

"Wait, what?! Cave-in?"

"Quick, go check!"

"You are kidding me! We just got here!"

Word spread quickly among the various users resting in the area. After confirmation via PM and such, a few users walk up to the two.

"Oy, merchant! Where does the [Warp Scroll] lead to?"

"It's just outside the entrance, don't worry, you are not outside the teleportation range!"

The users looks at each other with some doubts, before one of them hands over 3 gold pieces.

"Thank you for your custom! Here you go!" The youth grabs a folded sheet of vellum from his pack and hands it to the archer.

"I will test it out, will let you guys know in a bit." The archer unfolds the sheet, laying it on the ground before stepping on it. The intricate magic circle gives off a soft light before the vellum disintegrates as the archer on top of it fades away.

One of the users stops moving all of the sudden, then nods once. "Alright, seems safe, 6 please."

"Sorry, 1 per customer only!"

\*muka\*

"Fine! 1 for each of us then!"

"Thank you for your custom!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"[Warp Scroll]! Selling [Warp Scroll]~!"

A sweet voice drifts throughout the various tunnels as a young girl and what looks to be her father are strolling through the cavern. They walled off any monsters that approached them, staying out of combat.

"[Warp Scroll]~! 1 per customer, 3 gold only~!"

A middle-age woman and her party walk up to them after finishing their fight with a pack of hounds. "Why are you selling [Warp Scroll] here, honey?" The woman gives the man accompanying the girl an accusing look. "Did your stupid father actually think anyone would buy that here?" The others that are accompanying her relax as a gentle

breeze from somewhere flows by.

The girl gives a pout, "eh? Didn't you know the entrance caved in? There's no way in or out now~"

The woman scowls as the rest of her party starts murmuring and checking PMs. One of them whispers something into the woman's ear, causing her to scrunch her face.

"Fine, I'll buy 7 then."

"Sorry, one per customer~"

The woman's face twitches, "okay, 1 for me then." She hands over 3 gold pieces.

The hooded-man behind the girl shakes his head. Replying in a deep voice, "4 gold pieces."

"What?! That's highway robbery, you-"

"You what? Stupid father was it? 5 gold pieces."

"You! Go-"

One of her companions hands over two more gold pieces while apologizing as the rest of them grab her from behind and cover her mouth. He hands over 5 more gold pieces to the girl, who in turn runs to the man. "Where does this [Warp Scroll] lead to? You know those things have a really short range, right?"

The man takes the money from the girl and gives her 2 sheets of folded

vellum. "It's just outside the entrance, we had a [Scribe] make the portals there."

The girl runs back and gives the man the vellum and 2 gold pieces. The man can only give a wry smile at the implication of those 2 gold pieces and thanks the little girl. The man gives one vellum to one of his companions before stepping on it. A soft glow comes from under his feet before he disappears.

A short while after, the group lay out the second vellum and make the woman step on it. She gives the hooded man the stink eye before disappearing. The rest quickly buy their scrolls from the girl and, who they assumed to be, her father before thanking them and disappearing.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The area's cleared, monsters are starting to flood back into the safe areas. Let's meet up." Bell is PMing Kun with a hand on her right ear.

"Got it, we haven't seen anyone for a while now, let's head back then."

"Yeah, let's me-"

Several groups of people shows up, blocking her and Rick. Some of them have a [Murderer]'s mark on them, looking closely, she recognize them as former members of the [Dawn's Moonlight] and [Monochrome Blades].

"Meet at the second safe area, we have company, will be running to



---

you guys hot." With that, she gives Rick a look before both of them starts running.

# Posterity

"Wa-"

Bell and Rick dash off into the tunnel where they came from, a few [Shadowhound]s have already appeared since they walked by previously.

"Nya nya nyan NYAN!" With her halberd partially extended, the felinoid slashes and runs down the [Shadowhound]s in the way, opening a path.

\*koro\*

\*te te te\*

Rick drops the caltrops he had previously bought in **Feia**, hoping to slow down any pursuers.

"Wait! Are gu-"

\*kan\*

A voice desperately screams after them as they run away, sounds of metal striking can be heard faintly as they run away.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*shin\*

"«Ice Wall»!"

"Right side is coming down, Kun-ni~"

"Got it."

"«Spell Modifier»!"

\*hyoo\*

"«Air Hammer»~"

\*GAN\*

As soon as a group of [Shadowhound]s breaks through an «Earth Pillar» from a tunnel on the right side of the chamber, a powerful mass of air slams them into the tunnel's wall.

"Reduce the amplification a bit Kun-ni~"

"You sure?"

"Don't worry, don't worry~, cast it after I shoot first though~ «Air Hammer»!"

Without waiting for a reply, the girl with aquamarine hair smashes the «Ice Wall» that's blocking the tunnel on the left side, breaking it into shards and stunning the monsters attacking it.

"«Spell Modifier»!"

\*tatata\*

"«Dust Devil»~"

Note: Dust Devil is literally a mini-tornado

\*fyu fyu fyu fyu\*

Without slowing down, the two cast spells in quick succession. A miniature tornado filled with ice shards from the destroyed wall sucks in all but one hound, shredding them to pieces. The black-haired man runs forth right after casting toward the lone hound.

\*ka\* \*sha\*

Striking the claw that was aiming for him with a magician's rod in his left hand, Kun follows the rod's momentum and chops with a dao in his right hand through the thick, inky neck of the [Shadowhound] that remained out of range of the «Dust Devil».

*[Note: Reminder, Dao is a single bladed sword.]*

"Eh?!"

"Eh? «Fireball»!" Without hesitation, a small fireball flies from the young man's outstretched palm toward the right tunnel.

"Nya!" A shadow leaps to the side of the tunnel, before leaping to the ceiling and kicking off of it to land gracefully into the chamber.

\*buo\*

"Wha- AHH!"

The duo tenses up as they recognize the figure and the voice in the

back.

"Don't worry, we have some time." Bell gives herself a pat to get rid of some dust before fully extending her halberd with a \*kin\*.

"Damn it you guys, I would be roasted if I reacted any slower." A blonde youth with singed, frizzled hair walks out from the tunnel and into the chamber.

"How many are we facing?" Kun walks up toward the two while trying to peer behind Rick. Till is focusing on the other tunnel, in case more [Shadowhound]s appears.

"Looks to be a full [Raid], so likely 35 users."

"Damn, think we should get out first and come back later?"

"Not a bad idea, you guys teleport first, I'll stand guard." Bell nods her chin toward Till before turning around.

"«Fireball»!" Kun sends another fireball down the right-side tunnel, zooming by the side of Rick's head. Reacting right away, the youth turns and draws a pair of daggers. Although he brought the arrowless bow with him, its damage is subpar and isn't useful in this particular situation.

"Wait! I surrender! I'm here to talk! Look! I'm alone!"

An unfamiliar figure with its hands held up approaches the group. A scratched out symbol can be seen on its breastplate.

\*shin\*

"«Ice Wall»."

"Alright, close enough buddy, stop right there, what do you want?" Rick put the pair of daggers into a reverse grip before crossing his arms and raising one of his eyebrows.

The man stops suddenly and stares at the youth's unique hairstyle before giving himself a shake and continuing. "Are you the ones selling the [Warp Scroll]s?"

The youth slowly turns his head back toward the catwoman and young man, the two both give a curt nod.

"That's us, got a problem?" Rick snaps his head back toward the man and raises his other eyebrow while dropping the previously raised one.

"Look, there are some innocent people that got tricked into helping some sick sons of bitches, we are trying to get them out of here. They already lost enough levels already, they don't need to die on top of that."

"Wait... What? Aren't you guys blackhearted blades and moonlight loonies, why would you guys help anyone?" Rick drops his arm, while Bell shifts her weight forward slightly.

The man winces at those words before giving a sigh. "Look, most of us in the two guilds were tricked, we didn't know half the shit the leadership and their inner circle were doing until after we got wiped out the other day. All of us left and grouped together to try and beat this dungeon one last time, we just wanted to raid and have fun in the first place."

"Then why do you guys have the [Murderer]'s mark?"

"We met the bastard GMs and their group, they tricked random people and sacrificed them at the altar. Our groups collided after we went to rescue those people, we killed some of them. Did you know that you can sacrifice people's levels to bypass the first section of the cave leading to the [Boss]? And that both guilds were doing that to strangers without letting the average member know?" A bitter smile spreads across the man's face. "No wonder we were so hated, we thought it was merely jealousy and contempt."

It is the group's turn to wince. They were tricked previously for the exact same thing, that's how they got to level 0 in the first place, but to think they would have even tricked their own guildmates. Bell grinds her molars before giving Kun a look, he merely close his eyes and nods. She walks pass Rick, who also gives her a nod as he cross his arms again.

"We don't trust you 100%, but we will give you a chance. Lead us to these people that you claim to be protecting, if what you said is true, we will even give you guys the scroll."

\*pirapira\*

Bell opens a pouch and brings out a block of stone.

"This is a bomb, I'm going to attach it to you. If you so much as try to trick us, we will blow you up on the spot." Turning toward the girl that's still standing guard. "You are in control of it, Till!"

The man nods calmly, letting the catwoman tie it to his waist.

"Please hurry, I'm not sure if my comrades can win the fight. They

should still be fighting near the altar."

\* \* \* \* \*

\*haa haa\*

"What... what the hell are... you guys...?"

The group ran from the 2nd safe area all the way to the entrance of the [Boss] dungeon without pause. The catwoman opened the path by driving any [Shadowhound]s in the way to one side before being finished off by either the young man or the youth. When there's a large group of hounds, the girl would slam them to death by casting a combination spell with the young man, a combo that the man has never seen before. The group didn't slow down at all when they reached the lower levels where the tunnels are narrower and monsters are fewer, but a lot stronger. Treating the [Orthrus], [Black Cadejo]s and [Black Shuck]s no differently than the [Shadowhound]s save for the little girl that occasionally impaled them with ice, the group advanced at a relentless pace; what shocked the man was that these monsters would normally require a full party to take down. The man had to be rescued numerous times as individual monsters that bypassed the group came after him. Trying to catch up, getting rescued, desperately fending off individual monsters that would come after him, it is small wonder he's worn out.

*[Note: Orthrus is a two-headed dog from Greek myth (related to Cerebus), Black Cadejo usually appear in the form of a large (up to the size of a cow), shaggy dog with burning red eyes and a goat's hooves, although in some areas they have more bull-like characteristics. Black Shuck is one of many ghostly black*



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*dogs recorded across the British Isles. Sometimes recorded as an omen of death, sometimes a more companionable animal, it is classified as a cryptid, and there are varying accounts of the animal's appearance. (Wikipedia)]*

The group stopped for a moment at the entrance to allow the man to catch his breath. Bell's paw traces the intricate design on the door, remembering the first time they were brought here. Giving it a push, it reveals a large chamber with a large altar sitting in the middle. Bubbling, hissing water surrounds narrow pathways that leads deeper into the cavern.

\*Kan Kan\*

The sounds of metal striking metal reverberate throughout the chamber. Various men and women are fighting one another, with many corpses laying about. At the bottom of the altar, a small group of people are huddled together, being protected by various [Guardian]s, who are slowly being overwhelmed by 2 dozen or so attackers.

"Damn it! «Backstab»."

The man that was out of breath leaps into action after seeing the situation. Seeing that they don't know who is on which side, the group quickly decide to focus on attacking the people that are attacking the [Guardian]s. Typically, [Guardian]s have high defense, but have relatively weak offense, thus making them ideal as defenders. Rick takes out his bow, unfolds it and shoots some of the attackers in the back. Till uses «Air Hammer» to stun them. Kun uses «Stardust» to blind the attackers as he follows Bell who is running silently toward the enemies.

The invisible arrows and «Air Hammer»s catch them completely off

guard; the man managed to critically hurt one of the attackers with his «Back Stab» before being forced to pull back. The [Guardian]s take the opportunity to forcefully push the attackers back, reforming their defensive line.

"Bell, toss me in there."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I will be fine, just don't send me to the roof."

"Got it."

Bell stops running, grabs Kun by the collar and turns him around to face her. Compressing herself like a spring, she turns Kun like a slow spinning top and then sends him flying by pushing both her paws into his chest while releasing all the stored energy in her body and his original momentum from the spinning motion.

\*shin shin shin shin\*

"«Spell Amplifier»... «Icicle Squall»!" While soaring in the large chamber, Kun sends icicles as large as men's arms toward the attackers. Righting himself in midair after casting, he uses "«Burst»!" to soften his landing just behind the [Guardian]s. "Quick, use these and get out of here!" He throws them some vellum of [Warp Scroll]s before sending an amplified «Fireball» over the head of the [Guardian]s.

"Where... where does it... lead to?" A teenaged boy with chattering teeth stammers out as the fight grows in intensity.

"What?! Anywhere else is safer than here! It warps to the entrance! Go! «Earth Pillar»!"

\*gaaaa\*

Kun raises an earthen wall to block an incoming fireball from behind. The group of huddled users disappear one by one as they use the scrolls to escape.

"Nya Nya NYANNNN!" Swinging her halberd around like a madman, Bell finally reaches the ones attacking the [Guardian]s and critically injures every one of them within her reach. Seeing that the ones they were protecting have escaped, the [Guardian]s break their «Defensive Stance» and start attacking back.

"I don't know who you people are, but thanks for the help!"

"Thank that guy over there, he brought us over. I'll leave the rest of the warp scrolls here, get out when you can."

Kun briefly talks with one of the [Guardian]s before rushing out towards Bell. Enemies would get knocked sideways or get stunned before being brutally bisected by the raging felinoid. Although [Wind Spells] are relatively weak compared to other elements, it has the advantage of being nearly invisible unless one's paying attention. Till, along with Rick, have been assisting Bell without anyone noticing, thus catching them off guard each time Bell swings at them.

With Kun going back to back with Bell, the fight quickly ended as the enemies get pincered and destroyed. The [Guardian]s quickly spread out from the spot and go assist their allies, while Bell and Kun would rush to help anyone nearby that one of the [Guardian]s assists.

A surge of enemies suddenly rushes toward them from the narrow pathways on the water as they were winning.

"DO IT, TILL! RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE! «SPELL AMPLIFIER»!"

"Got it Kun-ni~ «Dust Devil»!"

A small waterspout appears in middle of the water, dragging the enemy reinforcements into it.

\*hyu shi sha\*

Strong wind engulfs the area around the waterspout, anyone that touches the water are burned by both the heat and the acid it holds.

The fights have all ended save for the massacre occurring on the water, if one can even call it a fight.

"Holy shit..."

"Who are these guys?"

"They... are our allies, right?"

"I don't remember ANYONE that can do THAT."

"Niji brought them... so they should be fine?"

The group gathers around the altar where Kun had left the bag of [Warp Scroll]s. Not one of the defenders had used it, they chose to fight to the bitter end. As the defenders go about picking up the loot, the man that brought them here approaches them.

"Thank you for your help. Oh, right, I didn't introduce myself, my name is Niji" The man gives them a deep bow with his feet together.

*[Note: Niji's name means "second son".]*

"No problem, you weren't lying one bit, so get out of here, the entrance got caved in if you didn't get the news." Kun picks up the bag and offers it to the man.

"No, we still have to deal with the ones that went ahead. We can't let

them do as they please, or let them defeat this dungeon after doing what they did."

"Then give everyone a [Warp Scroll], if anyone's about to die, just go. We will help you with these sons of bitches. How many of them are left?" Rick's face holds a menacing expression as he imagines wiping the floor with Keely, Tabeus and everyone else that wronged them.

"Um... they had 4 raids when we spotted them, 3 raids already went in, we had 2 raids when we encountered the last raid and the victims."

"So they've 2 raids in here then? Since one came back already and got dealt with. You sure you guys want to keep going? We have barely 1 raid here including our party. No offense, but you guys are pretty weak." Bell has a deadpan expression as she calculates the odds as she cuts the bomb off.

"We are ashamed of what we were part of, we need to do this to clear our conscience."

"Alright, let's go then~"

\* \* \* \* \*

\*shin\*

"Alright, this should work... thanks, Kun, «Ice Shell»!"

"Stay low now~ «Gust»~"

The remnant group of former guild members and Bell's party advance

smoothly over the first section of the dungeon. This particular section has no monsters whatsoever, but the environmental hazards have destroyed many raids due to its irregular nature. The steaming, highly corrosive water comes in waves, revealing the odd foothold here and there beyond the narrow paths near the altar. Slipping into the water, getting sprayed by a random splash, or even getting stranded on a foothold would usually spell death for all involved. There's a path above which can teleport people down onto the narrow pathways, but it seems to be accessible only if you approached from the second section of the Boss dungeon.

*[Note: As in, it's an exit teleport only as a shortcut to get out.]*

To counter the environmental hazards, Rick is paving a path of ice while Till keeps any splashes away from the group. Kun is busy amplifying Rick's spell while Bell is responsible for any sudden changes and to command the few [Mage]s within the raid on where and when to apply more ice.

"This is easier than we thought... why did they have to sacrifice people...?"

"Maybe none of them thought of this method?"

"No, they did try this method, people got splashed, causing a panic before breaking the ice from all the sudden movement, wiping out the entire raid."

"Why didn't they just get someone to stop the splashes?"

"Hm... I don't think we had a [Wind Mage] in the guild... did yours?"

"Actually, you are right, we didn't have one as well. We thought they were a useless class. Who knew..."

The various members of the raid talk among themselves as they easily complete the section.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You guys get in the middle, this part is going to get rough. [Guardian]s! Box formation!"

The group had to climb a small hill after jumping off the ice onto the shore.

"Just how big is this dungeon, for it to have a small lake and now a hill..." Bell ponders as she follows Niji's instruction.

Groups of [Orthrus], [Ahuizotl]s and [Hellhound]s appear seemingly at random and from random directions on the barren path going up the hill. These enemies are significantly stronger than the enemies within the regular part of the dungeon. The fight consists of the [Guardian]s maintaining a «Defensive Stance» to absorb the initial attack, collapsing into a tighter formation as everyone else rushes out and slaughters the enemies; the attacking group then runs back behind the [Guardian]s when they get pushed back. This allows a war of attrition while spreading the damage around.

*[Note: Ahuizotl is described as dog-like, its waterproof fur often clumping up to create spikes (hence its name). The ahuizotl has hands capable of manipulation and an additional hand on its tail. The ahuizotl is feared due to its liking for human flesh, especially nails, eyes, and teeth. It is said to live in or near the water and to use the hand on the end of its tail to snatch its prey, dragging the person into the depths to drown him or her. (Wikipedia)]*

After about the 10th battle and nearly losing a man, Bell speaks up. "Niji, can you do me a favour? Line the [Guardian]s to the right and

left and we will handle the front and back."

Recalling how the the party of 4 managed to get to the [Boss] dungeon so fast, the way they fought and the way they dealt with the first section, Niji accepts the request. "Go ahead, [Guardian]s, two columns!"

"Two columns...?"

"Here...?"

"This catlady here has a plan! Get in formation!" Niji shouts over the dissenting voice, forcing them into formation.

"Rick, you and all the melees are with me to the front. Kun and Till, you two take the back with the ranged."

"Right away, your fatness."

Bell smacks Rick in the head with a \*kon\* as soon as he walks up to her.

"Time it right, Till."

"Got it~"

The fights come from the sides for a few more times, ending up with the usual war of attrition, one [Warrior] ended up dying by not running behind the [Guardian]s in time. Finally, a frontal assault occurs.

"Melees! Attack once then fall back behind a [Guardian], make it like a pinwheel and let the one behind you attack! Range! Save your shot for when a melee is about to strike! [Guardian]s! Form 2 rows, intercept any attack that's within your range, 2nd row, don't let the enemies move freely, don't move out of formation, be pillars that the melees



and range can hide behind!"

Rick shoots arrows at the various canines before falling back as they get close, Bell rushes up to the first one, hits it with a heavy swing and runs back with the momentum from the centripetal force. Melee fighters follow the same pattern after her, throw one heavy swing and get out. Since the ranged fighters are attacking just before a melee attacks a target, the heavy swings land more often than not. The [Guardian]s become living obstacles, whenever a canine engages one, a melee fighter would take the chance to attack it. Since the damage output is significantly higher, the battle becomes an one-sided slaughter as opposed to a war of attrition.

There are no significant injuries from the fight, and no potions are needed. The group moves on with higher morale.

The next fight starts with an attack from the rear. Kun starts giving out commands before some of them even become aware that they are under attack.

"Make a 2 man deep V, [Guardian]s! Melees to the flank and hit and run back when you have the chance! Range, heavy fire, focus on center, fire after Till! Go for it when they are in range Till. «Spell Modifier»!"

\*HYOO\* \*pyu pyu pyu pyu\* \*buo\* \*buo\* \*buo\* \*gaa\*

"«Air Lance»!"

"«Rapid Shot»!"

"«Fireball»!"

"«Fireball»!"

"«Fireball»!"

---

"«Earth Lance»!

Some canines are sent flying, others tumbling down the hill and just a few remain standing. Unfortunately for them, the ones that remain standing are greeted with spells and arrows. The melees rush out and hack them to death before running back behind the [Guardian]s. This process repeats itself a few more times and only once did a [Guardian] need to intervene. This formation drains a touch more MP, but there's next to no damage.

With their method of advancing forward secured, the group moves swiftly to the next part of the dungeon.

# Posterity 2

\*doro doro\*

"Are... you... serious?" Rick stammers as he reaches the top of the hill. The group had fended off all the monsters on their way to the top of the hill, where a large lake of lava resides; filled with floating pieces of rock that have melted. Due to the change in formation as well as Niji adapting tactics suggested by both Bell and Kun for when monsters attack from the side, there hasn't been a single casualty save for that 1 warrior.

"Yeah, this is why we haven't been able to conquer this even with all the resources in our guilds. There were simply no ways for a large amount of people to reach the Boss. Karla, show them." Niji walks up from behind Rick and waves his hand at one of the [Mage]s situated in the back.

\*shin shin shin shin\*

The one known as Karla nods, walks toward the front and brings her magician's rod forward. "«Icicle Squall»!"

Finger-sized icicles form in the distance over the lake of lava, fall and evaporate before even getting into the lava.

\*shin\*

She follows that by forming a long, ice projectile hovering over her rod. "«Frozen Javelin»!"

\*fyu\*

The javelin flies through the air with a beautiful arc as it dives toward the lava in the distance.

\*shiiiiiii KAN\*

The projectile explodes as it lands in the lava. «Frozen Javelin» is a weak ice spell that relies on freezing a fixed area around where it lands. But the javelin and the rock that formed when it first made contact caused a violent explosion.

"There are also random areas where we would suffer a [Poison] debuff when we try to cross on those floating rocks. New ones appear in a different spot when they sink." Niji points at the bobbing platforms of various size that line the lava lake. "And the stones will also start sinking if there's too much weight on them. It's already hard enough hopping across on those floats and getting away from the poison pockets, but the Boss is located in the middle of this lake and there are monsters that appear from the within the lava."

"Hmm..."

"Damn..."

"..."

"~~~"

Bell, Kun, Till and Rick all share complicated expressions. The rest of the raid are looking at them with interest, same with Niji. "Is... something the matter?"

"Would a bridge work~?"

"Yes, no, well, no it would take too long to build it."

"How about anchored lines?"

\*kon\*

"Be serious, Rick. Everything would start melting or get set on fire before we can use it."

"Damn, the ceiling is too high too, how come there's a cavern this big, argh."

"How about a boat~?"

"A boat?" x3

"A boat~, lava is denser than water, we just need to make sure it doesn't melt~"

"We don't have a way to move though."

"Oops~"

"How about anchored li-" Rick ducks a punch by Bell. "Listen first you damn fatass. How about anchored lines with it way above the lava?"

"Huh?" x3

"Can't we just get to each platform and make a pole on each of them and string a rope at the top?"

"... what good would that do?"

"I don't know...?"

\*kon\* \*kon\*

"What was the second one for?"

"Wait~! How about if we increase the size of the floating rocks? Let's make partial bridges~"

"Right! These rocks aren't floating, they just got cooled somehow and didn't melt!"

"What?" x2

"Look, lava usually cools down when it meets air, it forms a crust that most people can walk on in minutes. When we have cooled down basalt crust, it will take a lot of energy to melt them back down again. So rock we make will remaining floating on top for a while as long as it's big enough."

"Ohhh!" x2

"Okay, so what we need is Kun to..."

The group of 4 discuss their plan as the raid looks at them with dumb-founded expression. None of them reacted until Till, with the help of Kun, make a large circular disc of lava on top of one of the floating pieces of rock by using a mix of «Dust Devil» and «Spell Modifier». The airborne lava slowly solidifies in a circular crust after a few minutes, creating a newer, larger platform.

"Okay, we will make an artificial platform every once in a while, they will serve as the main staging area where we fight. How does that sound?"

Niji and the rest can only nod in agreement as they stare wide-eyed at the casual way these people come up with solutions. It may be impossible for the lava to be ice cooled due to the difference in temperature, but air cooled is possible since the difference in temperature isn't as extreme, as evidenced by the appearance of the original bits of "floating platforms".

"We will make a more secured platform the nearer we are to the boss, there's two raids in here, no doubt they are aware their allies were defeated by now. Just let us know when we are close to the Boss."

\*pyo-n\*

\*doro\*

\*ta ta ta\*

\*doro\*

\*ta ta ta byo-n\*

\*doro\*

The raid moves onto the 5th artificial platform made by Till and Kun. Bell jumps into the dead center of the artificial circle platform, moves toward the furthest edge as Rick jumps onto it before running toward the center as Kun and other follow through. Till is on standby to send anyone flying in case they slip or if the platform starts to tilt in the wrong way. There was a near scare on the first artificial platform, but the raid had since mastered on how to maintain balance for the most part. It helps that lava is thick and dense, making it difficult to flip the platforms in the first place.

"Maintain a circle formation and shift accordingly! I'll go and pull any mobs that're ahead."

The catwoman leaps off from the artificial platform and jumps continuously forward until she can barely be seen. [Firehound]s and [Magmahound]s would occasionally appear as the group advances, but they appear individually or in pairs, making them easy to deal with when the raid can maintain a formation on a large platform as opposed to being spread out on smaller bits of floating rocks.

*[Note: There's an intention pun here as [Firehound] is written as [???] where ?? means hotdog. ??? phonetically sounds like a sauce covered hotdog.]*

"Nya nya nya! Incoming!" The familiar voice with a feline tremble fills the air as a shadow quickly appears from the distance. Behind it are [Firehound] and [Magmahound] that's lunging at her from within the lava and softly splashing down as they miss her. The [Firehound] is an apparition with no physical body as it's made completely out of flame standing at 3 meters tall and at least twice as long. The [Magmahound] appears to be a dog with form, with pulsating, glowing lines where light and heat radiate from its surface which crisscross its comparatively dark, rocky flesh, it stands slightly taller than 2 meter with a lean, streamlined body resembling certain sharks.

\*fyu\* \*shin shin shin shin\*

"«Rising Tempest»~!"

"«Icicle Squall»!" x5

The [Firehound] gets sent flying into the air and as a storm of ice ravages its body, without the heat of the lava to shield it from the cold, the fire is quickly put out, leaving no trace of its existence.

\*GAO buo\*

A deep growl fills the air as the [Magmahound] launches a fireball at Bell who has just reached the platform, she quickly runs behind the [Guardian]s who close their ranks and prepare the shields as the beast keeps running behind the fireball.

"«Ice»! «Rapidfire»!"



Rick fires off a series of ice enchanted arrows from his bow directly into the fireball to reduce its power.

\*kan\*

The fireball explodes at the rank of [Guardian]s before the canine rams into their shields, causing a shift in balance on the platform.

"Hold your ground! Range unit! Move back a little!" Niji busies himself commanding the raid. As something flies above their head's.

\*chi chi\* \*SHA\*

"«Spell Amplifier»... «Water Beads»!"

"«Rising Tempest»~!"

A stream of water rips through the air from the flying figure, a shrill sound fills the air as a waterjet releases an explosive sound of steam bursting forth from the hole in the [Magamahound]'s back. The beast turns backward to try to bite the offending attacker, but the flying figure drifts upward toward the dark, endless ceiling, completely out of its reach. The rest of the raid stares at the unusual scene

"Stop looking and attack! Melees up, [Guardian]s back! Range, protect the melees!" Taking the opportunity with the beast's back exposed to them, Niji skillfully keeps his troops in check.

\*Gaaaaaaooooooooo\*

The [Magmahound] growls as various swords, axes and lances pierce and slash its hindquarters. Turning around, it tries to bring its front claws down on the melees.

\*GA\*

"«Earth Lance»!" x4

4 large pieces of stone in the shape of a cone the size of a full grown man points toward the beast's claws before slamming it away. The melees take the chance to rush the canine's other front leg and proceed to rip it to pieces.

\*GAAAAOOOO\*

\*chi SHAAAAAAAAA\*

A fireball starts to gather in the [Magmahound]'s mouth with its head facing the ceiling before a shrill sound fills the air again. The sound of steam rushing out fills the air again before the beast collapses into the lava, twitching a few times before it stops moving completely.

\*fuo-n\* \*fuo-n\*

\*tatata\*

"«Gust»!"

"«Gust»~!"

Kun drops from the air with gusts of wind suddenly slowing him down before he lands. This happens while everyone scrambles in an organized fashion to try and balance out the platform that suddenly lost the weight of the [Magmahound].

"Bell, closer to the chest the next time, I thought you were going to crush my guys."

"Sorry! Hard to get a stable footing on this damn thing."

"Umm... what classes are you people? Did you send him flying without magic? And he... cut that thing with... was that water?" There's a mix of awe and fear in the gruff looking middle aged man's voice.

"Look, I'll be honest with you, Niji. I'm based on a [Warrior], that girl there is a [Wind Mage], he is technically a [Novice]. You folks... just don't know how to use your abilities to its potential."

The man just looked at the felinoid with a blank expression as though someone robbed him of his soul. A commotion starts from the rest of the raid.

"But... everyone agreed [Wind Mage]s are weak and useless."

"Can you say that after the first part of the dungeon? Now?"

"Wait, he's a [Novice], a [Novice]. He isn't a [Hex Mage]... how the hell was he amplifying all those spells?"

"Don't forget that [Archer], he was shooting a string of Ice arrows without using actual Ice arrows..."

The platform starts to shift as the discussion gets more animated by the minute.

\*koho\*

"Platform is going to tip over at this rate~"

\*tatata\*

Everyone scrambles to restore the platform's balance.

"Regardless of what we are, just remember that there's more than meets the eye, don't limit yourselves." The catwoman tells it to no one in particular before leaping onto one of the numerous small platforms.

The rest of her party follows, leaving the raid behind before some of them chase after the group.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh geez." A wide grin spreads across Rick's face as he enjoys the sight before him.

"AAHHHHHHHH!!!!!!" Another figure flies into the gently undulating lava in the distance, this is the 5th such case since they readied the exceptionally large and thick platform in preparation for dealing with a raid. Except the group have nothing to do but enjoy the show before them since the Boss and his minions have already wiped out one raid and is in the process of wiping out another.

"Hey, isn't that Tabeus?" Bell's iris contracts as her almond-shaped eyes focus on a figure into the distance.

"«Hawkeye»!"

"Oh damn! Good eye, good eye. Now for a limited time offer, a complimentary backside massage will accompany the purchase of any amplifier!"

Kun simply chuckles at the horrible infomercial that the youth has been trying to reenact before casting. "«Spell Modifier»."

\*pyu\*

"«Aim Shot»!"

...

"OW! Oh shi-"

A figure in the distance jumps high in the air covering his rectum with one hand before a cone of flame from a three-headed dog covers him completely.

The 3 of them laugh until tears are in their eyes. Till just maintains a smile while the rest of the raid shudders.

"Hey, Bell, Bell, I will throw in a one time offer of a steam cooked sausage if you can find me Keely."

"Oh hell yeah! Let me see..."

Niji and the raid shrink in fear as they watch the group of demon-possessed avengers enjoy their revenge, making a mental note to never mess with these people. Niji is sweating bullets as he recalls the time when he confronted them and is glad they were willing to listen to him.

# Posterity 3

"There he is!" The catwoman points at a figure in full plate armour on the other side of the three-headed dog. The youth readies his aim at the figure, "wait, wait, Rick, I think that three-headed dog is the boss here. Let them deal with it for now."

"That's right, he is called [Cerebus]. He's located on one of only two proper islands within this lake of lava." Niji compose himself before interjecting, "The island he is on is just big enough to fit around 40 people, so we were never able to overwhelm it with numbers."

Someone moves to the spot where Tabeus was at previously and is directing that section of the raid as the conversation continues. The raid is divided into 3 groups, spaced evenly apart, that's surrounding the [Cerebus]. Each group is further broken into two subgroups, the inner group to deal with the [Cerebus] while the outer group deals with minions. The formation allows at least one group to always be able to target the back of the [Cerebus] at the expense of being exposed from all sides.

"What about the 2nd island?" Kun turns away from the fight and looks at the scruffy looking rogue.

"It's beyond the island the [Cerebus] is guarding. And no, we already tried sneaking past him, he ignores everything else to hunt whoever's trying to approach it. With the lack of a safe foothold and a way to defend themselves, anyone that tried to do so died."

"Damn it, let's help them out for now."

Rick clicks his tongue in annoyance as he takes aim at a [Magmahound] that's approaching the [Cerebus] raid from the side. "A little help Kun?"

"Got it. «Spell Modifier»!"

\*pyu\*

"«Aim Shot»!"

The [Magmahound] notices something is approaching it and turns to confront the threat. It sees a clear, slightly blurred something a split second before it enter its dark sullen eye. The beast roars before throwing its head back and forth while thrashing about, magma seeping from its wounded eye socket. The raid fighting the [Cerebus] notices the commotion but didn't care when it's obvious the beast doesn't pose a threat. The [Magmahound] struggles a little while longer before it stops moving and slowly starts to sink into the lava.

"Nice shot, Rick-ni~"

"..."

"..."

"..."

The rest of the raid looks at the scene with slackened-jaws. It's the first time they've seen anyone taking down a mob here in one shot.

\*PA\*

"Holy shit, nice shot Rick. How the hell did you get its eye?" Bell gives the youth a slap on his back.

"Eh... It was a fluke, I was just aiming for its body."

The raid turn their heads toward him, frozen in their shocked expression.

"Fluke or not, that was a one shot kill." Niji starts scratching his cheek.  
 "We didn't even think these beasts follow conventional weak-"

"Till! «Spell Modifier»!"

The girl with the aquamarine hair turns around and faces the [Firehound] that's approaching them. "Hmm... let see if this works~ Please put up a wall everyone~"

"Huh?"

\*shin shin shin shin SHIFUUMUGAN \*

"«Ice Wall»~"

\*gan gan\*

"Sh- «Earth Pillar»!"

"«Earth Pillar»!"

An extremely thick and sturdy wall of ice is formed under the [Firehound], but it is still no match for the lava's heat. Cracks form in the wall before entire sections of it flies about like fireworks, sending shards, steam, and water in every direction. The [Firehound] tries to dodge but it still got hit by the random shrapnel and debris. 2 [Mage]s managed to react in time and raise defensive walls to protect the raid.

"Oh shit! Move it!"

\*tatata\*





"«Rapidfire»!"

"«Air Lance»~"

"«Earth Lance»!" x3

\*KAN KAN KAN pikkan pikkan KAN KAN KAN KAN KAN\*

The melees were the first to react since they weren't busy doing anything aside from watching, using their few long range skills to strike at the top of the newly formed looming wall of death.

Most of the ranges join in as soon as they snapped out of it.

"One more time, Till! «Spell Modifier»!"

\*ffffuuuusshhhHOOOKAN ppaassssshhhhhhaaaaaa\*

"«Air Hammer»~!"

The dull gray wall swings backward toward an upright position before tipping over backward. The [Firehound] that just got out of the lava doesn't even react as the wall spells out its doom. Another splash of lava flies up into the air, fortunately it is flying away from the raid.

"Oh my gods..."

"This isn't good for my heart..."

"That was unbelievable..."

"Wait... we survived... WE SURVIVED! This is the first time!"

"You are right!"

As the majority of the raid celebrates, Bell grabs Till and Kun and heads to the end of the platform. Niji on the other hand turns toward the [Cerebus] with a frown on his face. After the cheers died down, Niji blows out an angry snort and heads toward the group that's at the edge of the platform.

"They noticed us, and started taunting and shit, let's kill them first and then... wait, what are you guys doing?"

"shhhhhhhh..." Rick holds an index finger to his lip as he whispers.

There are various odd, protruding clumps on the platform that is obviously unnatural. Following the line of sight of the group, Niji notices a small globule of lava about 5 cm in diameter, with bits of dull gray peeking through, that's floating in the air. Everyone, save for Rick, is kneading their brows in concentration.

"What's going on?" Niji lean into Rick to whisper his question.

"Bell started saying something about only water expanding and cooling too fast and something, then she dragged these two to get some samples. The lava got stuck to the platform after Till took some out and cooled it, so now they are making a usable sample."

The floating ball of lava gradually solidifies as it spins slowly in the air. A few more minutes pass before a slightly deformed ball of dull gray floats in the air.

"Go for it, Till. Everyone, step back."

Rick and Niji moves out of the way while Bell steps to the side.

"«Gust»~"

\*kan\*

The ball of solidified lava drops with a metallic clang after Till sends it flying onto a nearby empty

spot on the platform.

\*fuuuu\*

Kun breathes a sigh of relief as he wipes his forehead with his sleeve.

\*pichan\*

"«Water Beads»." The catwoman splashes the malformed orb with some water before picking it up off the floor. "Huh... it's cool to the touch... and it actually grew..."

Everyone, saves for Till, looks at her with a questioning gaze.

"Really~?!" Till runs up and grabs the sample out of Bell's hand and inspects it. Polishing it, knocking it, and staring at it with a thoughtful look.

\*ehhen\*

Niji grabs their attention with a cough, "sorry for interrupting, but," pointing toward the [Cerebus], "those guys noticed us, Keely even PMed me to tell us to scram."

Rick scoffs at the remark, "ha! I oughta shoot him in the ass as well!"

"Incoming!" A warning roars from the other side of the platform.

"We will worry about this later, we can finish them off at anytime." Bell starts running toward the approaching [Magmahound].

"Don't worry about it, Niji, they couldn't take down [Cerebus] before, there's no way they can do it now. Not with us here ready to wipe them

out." Kun follows the felinoid with quick steps.

Rick rotates his wrists outward with spread out hands and gives a shrug and walks off, followed by Till who's still playing around with the orb.

"Just how easy going are you people..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The melees have managed to bait the [Magmahound] by the time the group arrives. The range users are not attacking in earnest, but instead focusing on defense and helping the melees out by interrupting attacks by the beast or distracting it when the melees strike. The raid have unconsciously started putting into practice the tactics that were taught previously by Bell and Kun.

\*pyu\*

"«Aim Shot»!" Rick sends an arrow right into the left eye of the [Magmahound] as soon as he's in range.

\*gAAO\*

The beast roars in pain before swiping at the melees blindly.

"Damn it, guess I can't do it without Kun."

\*gan\* \*gan\*

"«Earth Lance»!" x2

\*gao gao\*

Two [Mage]s send a pair of stalactite into the supporting legs of the [Magmahound] as it attacks randomly, causing it to fall flat on its abdomen. [Guardian]s quickly surround the beast to stab and tangle its limbs while the melees go to town with it.

Bell and Kun look at the raid with a smirk since they don't even get the chance to join the action.

"What... you guys are done already?" Niji ran with his weapons drawn, but it seems like help wasn't necessary. He squints his eyes, "we only leveled once since then, what changed?"

\*FFAAAA\*

\*GGGGGGGGGGGGGAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAOOOOOOOOOO\*

\*BBUUOOOO\*

The [Cerebus]'s roar rips through the area. Plumes of a gas spew forth from lava everywhere, while it breathes out fire from each of its mouths.

"Argh..!"

"Damn it, [Poison]!"

"«Breeze»~" The girl casually sweeps the poison away with a refreshing gust of air as she continues to play with the misshapen orb in her hand.

"Damn it, can't risk waiting longer! Kun!"

The young man gives a nod, "«Spell Modifier»!"

\*pyu\*

"«Aim Shot»!" Rick sends a carefully aimed shot toward the rear end of Keely

The rampaging [Cerebus] unexpectedly starts spinning after using up its fire breaths, it starts biting with its multiple heads while lashing with its long tail like a whip. It trips numerous people that happen to be attacking it from its rear, one of the people tripped also happens to be Keely. As he flips backward from having his legs knocked out from underneath him, the position where his back end used to be momentarily became his front end. The resulting \*KAN\* and pitiful \*Oooo\* surprises everyone, including the [Cerebus].

Rick and Kun cover their crotch instinctively while Bell makes a sympathetic grimace. Till is still busy with the lump of solidified lava thus missing the sight. The rest of the raid look at the three and piece together the puzzle. Males among them squirms with their thighs squeezed together while the females either sympathetically turn their head away or make a grimace as well.

\*pan pan\*

"na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu..."

"hahahahahah, AHAHAHAHAHAHA."

Kun claps his hands together as though he's praying at a funeral. Rick starts laughing so hard that he has to fall onto the floor and roll onto his back.

The [Cerebus] is the first to recover from the unexpected scene and slams its large, heavy paw onto the prone Keely, squishing him like a

beetle. The rest of the raid reacts too slowly, missing their chance to save their leader. Panic follows as different people try to take command. With Tabeus gone, there isn't a suitable raid leader left in the raid. The [Cerebus] slowly, but surely, kills off the raiders one by one.

"Get up, Rick! Snipe it while we still have the chance."

The still giggling youth struggles to get up and pair up with Kun to take shots at the [Cerebus]'s head. The rest of the raid get into formation in case any new enemies shows up and prepare for the [Cerebus] once it finishes dealing with the other raid.

\*pyu\*

\*pyu\*

\*pyu\*

\*pyu\*

"Damn it, it isn't doing jack!" Rick curses as each of his «Aim Shot» bounces off the [Cerebus]'s hide, its rapid turning motions making the invisible arrows miss their marks.

\*gan shin shin shin shin\*

\*kan kan kan\*

Behind the two, the raid have engaged with a [Firehound] and [Magmahound] successively. Due to their newfound comfort in dealing with the beasts, the raid didn't even sound off a warning, allowing the two to snipe at the boss uninterrupted.

"Incoming [Cerebus]!" The youth fires one last shot at the [Boss]



before retreating into the formation with Kun.

\*GAAAAOOO\*

\*basha bash basha basha baSHA BASHA BASHA\*

The [Cerebus] gives off another air splitting roar after smashing one last warrior into bits. It starts running toward them over the lava at a rapid pace, causing splashes of lava to fly in its wake.

"Range! Kill its momentum! Kun and Till, you guys are the last line of defense!"

"«Ice Wall»!"

"«Ice Wall»!"

\*shin shin fuuuuuOOO\*

"«Aim Shot»!"

\*pyu\*

"«Earth Lance»!"

"«Icicle Squall»!"

\*ka\*

\*gan\* \*shin shin shin shin ssshhhhhhhhiiiiiii\*

Walls of ice are raised in the distance in front of the charging canine, chunks fly off before exploding from the difference in temperature, making the shards similar to flak. The beast has to turn to avoid them, allowing an arrow to strike it in the head. Unfortunately, it bounces off

the canine of the canine before pouncing like a tiger to leap over the stalactite and fingers of icicles heading its way.

*[Note: The original line was making a pun off "canine" (the fang/tooth) which is read as "Tiger Tooth" and jumping like a tiger. Since the pun can't survive as is, I use canine (the tooth) with canine (the animal), the second canine has been added by me in order to save the pun :P]*

"«Spell Modifier»!"

"«Rising Tempest»~"

\*fffyyyyyyuuuuu\*

The massive canine slows down on its descent as a long, sustained gust of air slams into the beast's body. Due to its tremendous size, it falls onto the platform with a \*daaa\* causing one side of the platform to dip into the lava as the other end raises. The 5 meter tall three-headed black dog, with glowing red-orange stripes and bright red eyes, stumbles forward with its landing since its timing and posture was destroyed by the burst of air.

"Ahhhh!"

\*ssshiiiiii\*

One of the melees near where the [Cerebus] lands lost his footing and tumbles into the lava.

\*gan\*

\*«Earth Pillar!»"

One of the [Mage]s reacts quickly and summons an earthen wall to balance out the sudden weight and force.

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

A rain of invisible arrows flies into the face the of the beast, who starts shaking its head with closed eyes to protect itself as it tries to get back up on all fours. Rick was already in a stable position since he was using «Aim Shot» priorly, so he just kept the same position and used «Rapidfire» when the beast fell.

"Back! Back!" Niji gives an order as he quickly moves toward the center of the platform. The platform bounces back from the lava, tipping it into the opposite direction. The [Mage] quickly releases the earthen wall, allowing the platform to calm down. Several members fall onto to the ground due to the unstable footing. Fortunately, they still have tens of meters from the other end of the platform, so no one else fell into the lava.

"Okay, Niji, how the hell are we supposed to kill this giant son of a bitch?!" Rick stops shooting, gets up from his crouching position, and runs toward the double [Guardian] line formation they had used on the previous section of the dungeon.

"That isn't a son of a bitch, that's just a bitch."

"What?"

"There'd be something dangling if it's a he, wait, what the hell are you making me say. Nevermind, just hit it til it's dead!"

"..."

"..."  
 "..."

Bell, Kun and Till look at Niji with half-closed eyes.

"What? That's how we always fought it."

"Didn't you guys think maybe that's why you guys failed everytime...?"  
 The felinoid rolls her eyes.

"No plans other than hit it...?"

"Bell-ne, are they idiots~?"

\*GAoooooogaoooo\*

The [Cerebus] growls in anger after it's up on its legs again, slowly advancing toward the formation.

"We will try and think of something, do what you usually do, gods be damned, these people! Let's go, Till, I'm not too sure. Nyehnyehnyeh!"  
 Bell moves to a side of the formation while mumbling and hissing.

"Man, I'm not too bright myself... but you guys seriously didn't have a plan?" Rick shakes his head as he readies his bow and walks away.

"But... that's how these games work, no?" An exasperated Niji protests.

"I'm not sure about you, but even in a game, I will use everything possible to win." Kun joins the others as he leave Niji to handle the rest of the raid. Rick is already peppering the heads of the [Cerebus] with a barrage of arrows. It keeps swinging its head and swiping into air in annoyance.

"3 groups! You guys know the drill! Let's do this!"

\* \* \* \* \*

\*haa haa\*

"Damn it, anything else we can try?" Rick slumps his shoulders as he catches his breath.

He had been paired with Kun and then Bell as they tried to find some exploitable weakness on the beast, but it had been a fruitless endeavour. Arrows to [Cerebus]'s face were easily deflected or shaken off once it's on its feet. Bell's attempts to give it a bomb suppository were foiled by the supple and agile tail. Trying to aim for the underside of its paws where dogs usually have soft pads was suicidal once they saw the metal plates that were fitted on the underside of each paw.

The group also volunteered to take down minions that showed up to allow the rest of the raid to pin it down with harassing attacks and interfere with the [Cerebus]'s movement.

Till was busy saving anyone that got sent flying by sending them back onto the platform instead of into the lava. On the occasions where the canine would roar and cause poisonous gas to bubble forth from the lava, she would generate a breeze to get rid of it.

"GGaaaaaoooooGGGGAAAAAOOOOO"

Growling, the beast spins all around, biting with its different heads and lashing with its tail. The raid planned ahead after seeing it in

action in the distance. [Guardian]s drop to their knees and anchor their position while raising their shields. Everyone else lays on the ground behind these sanctuaries.

\*KAN KAN KAN KAN KAN KAN KAN\*

Sparks flies as teeth and tail pound away at the shields, but no one budges. The 4 of them happens to be ducking together at this time.

"Hey Bell, how about sending a block of ice into its mouth when it tries to breath fire again?"

"The ice won't explode, there isn't enough temperature difference unlike with the lava. But that isn't a bad idea, to have something explode inside its mouth. Seriously, what happened to you since school ended? It's like your IQ went up to triple digits all of the sudden."

"Hmm... actually, I can do that. Let's use Rick's idea, won't hurt to try at this point. Rick, Till, going to need you two to somehow keep its mouth open."

The [Cerebus] stops spinning when it sees that there's no effect whatsoever, save for the fact that its tail is a little tired.

\*BUUOOOOOO\* \*BUUUOOOO\* \*BBUUUUOOO\*

Taking a deep breath, it holds up its heads before swinging them forward and releasing 3 cones of flame into a section of the raid.

\*gan\*

An earthen wall pops up before the group of [Guardian]s,

"«Stardust»!"

"«Aim Shot!»!"

"«Air Lance»~!"

\*zin... zin... zin...\*

\*pyu\*

\*fyu\*

An invisible arrow flies toward the head that's exposed to the group. Sensing the incoming projectile, it stops breathing fire, closes its eyes and shakes itself. A buffet of air slams this head against the middle head, holding it in place while specks of light flies into the beast's mouth.

The [Cerebus]'s middle head stop breathing fire as well as it tries to push it's right head into its usual position.

"«Icicle Squall»!"

\*s..in ...in ... shin\*

The muffled sound of ice forming is barely audible above the last cone of flame breathing out from the [Cerebus]'s left head, which also stops breathing out flame abruptly.

\*OOoooooooo\*

The middle and the left head swings their heads up, howling before taking a deep breath, the right head breaths out fire for a moment before shaking wildly. A small amount of steam escapes from its nostrils and mouth. Seeing the unusual scene, Niji pops up.

"CHARGE!"

\*WWWAAAAAAAAAAAA\*

All the melees roar and rush forward to attack the beast's front limbs.

"No! Get back!"

\*GGAoooo GAOOOOOO\*

Bell's voice came too late. She jumps backward as did the rest of the group, barely avoiding the spinning machine of death.

\*bori\*

\*ZUN\*

\*KAN KAN KAN\*

\*bori\*

\*sssshhhhhhhhiiiiinii\*

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

"He-"

"NNNOOOOOOOOOO"

A large portion of the raid goes flying by the impacts, bitten to death, or have the [Cerebus]'s tail crush them where they stand.

"You IDIOT! Couldn't you have waited?" Bell's screaming at Niji who Till happens to save when he flew over their head's.

\*haa haa\*

Till is breathing heavily as her MP has reached rock bottom. The continuous casting of various wind spells since the fight began didn't allow her a chance to recover.



"But but but..."

"BUT NOTHING! WH-"

Kun steps in front of Bell to stop her with his hand up and points behind her.

\*chihiiiiii\*

She gives off a loud hiss before turning towards the beast.

"Okay people, evacuate if you don't want to lose any items! Use those warp scrolls now!" Kun starts shouting.

The few surviving raid members are shaking and looking at Niji in confusion.

"You too, Niji!"

"But..."

"GO! We will buy some time"

\*pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu pyu\*

Rick starts shooting and running as the beast tries to resume its attack. Bell dashes up right next to him and shoves her already collapsed halberd into his pack and starts running toward the beast.

"What the hell are you doing, Bell?"

"Warp back with my halberd, if I'm going to die anyways, I might as well do a rodeo, I always wanted to try one!"

"You crazy bitch..."

"GO ALREADY! «Spell Amplifier»... «Icicle Squall»!"

\*yun\* \*yun\* \*yun\*

\*SHIN SHIN SHIN SHIN\*

The sound of people activating their scrolls can be heard. Unexpectedly, icicles the size of large trees surrounds the beast.

"What the hell, Kun?" Rick looks up in disbelief, Niji and a few others look up as well.

The icicles slam down into the platform as the [Cerebus] dodges deftly while breathing out cones of flame to neutralize those that it fails to dodge. The icicles' impact causes the platform to wobble violently.

"«Nyetal Claws»... nyanyanyanyaNNNNYYAAAAAAA." Bell's body shape changes, with her entire body shrinking while her legs thicken ever so slightly.

\*byun shi byun KA byun KA byun KA byun KA byun KA byun shi\*

The catwoman jumps onto the front leg of the [Cerebus], digging her claws in. As soon as the beast reacts by raising that leg, she jumps off of it and onto a falling icicle one after another, going ever higher until she lands behind the beast's heads at the root of the necks. Like with its leg, she digs her claws into its flesh on its back.

"Ho-" Before Niji or anyone can say anything, they start warping toward the front of the [Barghest Dungeon].

\*GGAAAAAAOOOOOOO\*

The beast swings its heads and paws wildly to try and dislodge the intruder, sending the icicle shards flying. Kun immediately releases the spell causing them to fade away while he remains in a crouching position.

"Till!"

Rick dives and wraps Till within both arms at the last possible moment as a stray paw strike flies at her.

\*KAN\* \*gokin\*

A horrible sound of bone snapping follows the sound of impact. The duo is sent flying off the platform.

"Damn it. Hell, since we are going to die anyways... YOU TWO GO CHECK OUT THAT ISLAND! I know you are still alive and kicking, Rick, HOLD HER TIGHT!"

A small movement of Rick's hand that's opening and closing is barely visible, but the message got through.

"«Air Hammer»! «Air Hammer»! «Air Hammer»!"

\*fuuoo kan\* \*fuuoo kan\* \*fuuoo kan\*

Kun stands up from the still wobbling platform and sends the two flying toward the second island, using Rick as a cushion for Till. Rick would be dead in any case, but at least there's a chance of Till landing safely and she can at least recover some items to warp away with. If there happens to be treasure in that second island, even better.

\*GGAA—\*

"NNNNYYAAAAAAHHHHAAAHAAAA\* Bell is holding on for dear life with a crazed look in her eyes.

\*Ooo...\*

The [Cerebus] stops moving suddenly when it realizes that someone is near the island that it always protects. It gets ready to sprint back by lowering its center of gravity.

"LIKE I WILL LET YOU!" x2

"«Elemental Dance»!"

"«Spell Amplifier»... «Earth Pillar»!"

\*supa supa supa supa supa\*

\*GGGGGAAAAAANNNNNN\*

Bell digs in with the claws on her leg while pounding away with the claws on her arms.

A giant wall of earth raises from the lava, going tens of meters high and blocking almost the entire width of the lava lake.

"We aren't done with you yet little doggy!  
NYAHAHHAHAHAHAHA"

\* \* \* \* \*

\*haa haa\*

*Just a little more...!*

"Hold on Rick-ni, we are almost there."

\*ooan\*

*Please be enough!*

"«Gust»!"

\*fyu\* \*GAshan\*

"Wa!?"

I involuntarily swing backward and ended up facing the ceiling unexpectedly as Rick uses himself to cushion my impact.

"Rick-ni, Rick-ni! Are you okay?!"

I quickly get off of him and feed him a potion.

"oww... wow... we... survived that... ha... ha..."

I look at where we were a few moments ago, the entire area has been blocked off by an impossibly -no, unbelievably, there's nothing impossible here- large wall. Looking around, I notice a single hill... -a large mound?- with a cavern.

Reaching into his pouch, I quickly grab two [Warp Scroll]s out and help him to his feet. I kneel down, wrap my right arm on his waist while putting his left arm over my shoulder. After checking that we have a secure footing, I stuff one of the vellums into his hand.

"We are going to check that cave out and then warp out right away. If there's an enemy, warp away without me okay? I'll throw my valuables at you at the last moment."

"But..."

"No buts, you are not in a shape to walk properly, let alone fight."

Rick-ni just gives me a wry smile and nods his head. We slowly make our way toward the cavern, there really is nothing else on the island save for cave, which is pretty weird.

As soon as we step inside the cave, I notice the sudden drop in temperature. There's even a coat of ice on the walls in here! There are various food stuff lining the backwall.

\*kin\*

I hear a sound to the right, there's a young, dog-eared man with his eyes closed sitting on a stone bed. There seems to be people sleeping on the numerous stone beds in that side of the room. I drop Rick-ni's arm and points at the vellum in his hand. I can't say I expected this or that there's more enemies beyond the [Cerebus].

"Who goes the- wait... father?"

# Sidestory 1

*Damn... Am I just going to die like this...?*

I've lost track of how long I've been suspended in the air, some sort of invisible vine had been holding me in place the entire time. My vision fades as hunger and thirst overwhelms me.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Hmm... what's that smell? Why is my mouth all wet?*

I slowly open my eyes, I'm in some sort of cave...? The floor is some sort of big, flat stone and I'm laying on some dead grass. I sniff the air and I can tell that someone else has been here, wait, there's another smell as well, but they are gone now. In front of me is some food and water, I edge my severely weakened body forward and finish them all. Drowsiness overcame me, I move back onto the pile of dead grass and fall unconscious.

\* \* \* \* \*

I don't know how long I've been in here, but whenever I woke up, there's always food and water waiting for me. I inspected the walls, there seems to be several holes high on the wall where light pours in. There's a draft coming from some parts of the walls as well. I marked my territory and did my business.

One time I noticed something is looking in at me from the holes, I started shouting at it, but it quickly ran away. I haven't seen it again. Since there's nothing to do in here, I start pacing around. When I start getting tired, I head back to sleep.

Since I'd recovered, I'd been bored and alert.

\*ka kan kara\*

While I was sleeping, there are some strange noises near a part of the wall. The wall suddenly opens, revealing daylight and a gust of fresh air rushes in. I growl as I cautiously sniff the air and move toward the opening. The scents I smell before are stronger now, so they are close by or had been here recently. Seeing no alternative, I made my way out of the opening, a familiar scenery unfolds before me, I recognize the various smell of trees, the streams, and the blooming flowers. Since it seems safe, I run out of the cave and straight into the trees. I look back to see the weird hill where I was in, this is where those balding, two legged creatures live occasionally. I have no idea how I got there when I was near death, I will probably never know. It's too dangerous to stay here, so I run further into the forest and get as far away from here as possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*Da\*

\*Kara\*

"Get outta here brat."



A fat man with a moustache sneers as a soldier reaches inside the car after opening the door next to me and roughly grabs me by the collar, dragging me out.

"Your parents served well, we took special care to bring you here as per our duty." The man continues sarcastically as the 2 other men in uniform laugh. "Don't worry, we will make sure to take really good care of the donations your parents made to the country!" The laughter gets louder before the car speeds off back toward the city.

I look at the vast scenery before my eyes, it's the summer family home that my dad brought me to every year. While I look on with bittersweet memories, \*wasa wasa\* sounds startle me. I turn to look at the source of the sound, but there's nothing there. Sighing, I walk toward the building that's going to be my new home.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*wasa wasa\*

\*haa haa\*

\*wasa wasa wasa wasa\*

The prey run left and right through the leaf litter before finally splitting off. Two of them are running in the direction of the water, perfect! I chase them with all my might to give them no quarters.

\*bashan\*

\*bashan\*

The prey falls over the sudden cliff and into the water just as planned.

\*basha\*

I leap into the water as usual and get ready for my meal. I start looking for my prey as I swim in the water. In front of me stands that two legged creature that I've seen on occasion, it is holding a stick that he used to hunt prey with. I yelp in surprise before swimming back the other way. I stare at him from the shore, cursing my luck to have let my prey got away by offering them directly before the creature. The creature stares at me, it seems it was surprised by my appearance too.

If I recall, snow covered the ground twice since the creature showed up. Going by the smell, it's similar to the cave I was in when snow covered the ground six times ago.

\*pasha\*

\*pasha\*

The creature starts moving about in the water, making two splashes as it plucks two objects out of the water and holds them up.

*THOSE ARE MY PREY!*

I scream in anger internally as I look on. The creature looks at the prey, at me, back at the prey again. It puts its stick through a vine with a fruit hanging off of it and puts it on its hairless body while holding my prey on another limb. It slowly walks out of the water and puts the long stick with the fruit down, it brings out a shiny stick from somewhere and bites into my prey. I can only look on as the creature steals my meal. Instead of eating it, the creature reaches over to the fruit,

opens it and brings out a wet prey. He bites into it with the short, shiny stick as well.

Holding onto one of my prey and a wet prey in each limb, it shows off as it turns toward me. After a moment, it lays them onto the ground before walking off with one of my prey, its long stick, and the fruit; I don't see the short stick anymore. I follow the creature with my eyes, wary and unsure what it's trying to do. It disappears toward to the weird hill, leaving the prey behind. I sit vigilantly in case the creature returns.

After a while, the creature doesn't return. I cautiously approach the spot where he bit into the prey, I can see the dead furry prey and a dead wet prey laying on the stony shore. Dragging both further away from the shore, I eat my meal while keeping my eyes out for thieves.

Halfway through my meal, the sky thieves appears. I cannot deal with two of them, so I grab the mostly uneaten wet prey and run into the woods, leaving the mostly eaten furry prey behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*Da\*

\*Da\*

\*ta ta ta\*

\*Kan\*

\*UUrrrRRRA UURRRRRRAAAAA\*

\*kAN KAn kan\*

"The brat will die on his own,' he said. 'If starvation doesn't get to him, the wildlife will get him,' he said. 'It's just a matter of time before

we can just take all the assets', he said. YOU DAMN IDIOTS! IT HAS BEEN 4 YEARS AND HE'S STILL ALIVE AND KICKING!" A fat man twists his moustache angrily as he berates the two men working on a cage. Inside the cage, a loudly raging, roaring bear rattles the metal bars as he slams himself into it. The fat man stops playing with his moustache and grabs one of the spears strapped on the side of the pickup truck.

\*zaku zaku zaku zaku\*

\*UUUUUUUUURRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAA\*

The fat man stabs the grizzly bear with a long spear several times from the side of the truck. "Shut up you stupid beast!"

"Sir! Please stop angering the bear!"

"Calm down sir, we can't unload it like this!"

The two men trying to unload the cage off the back of a pickup truck plea with the fat man, with the truck's solar panel in an overhang position to accommodate the cage. The rusty cage sprays the still unevaporated morning dew each time the bear slams into it.

"What does it matter?! We need it to be angry for it to kill that damn kid anyways!"

\*zaku zaku\*

The fat man stabs the the bear twice more as the men tries to slide the cage off a metal ramp.

\*UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUURRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRA

The bear roars in anger before slamming itself into the side of the

cage, tipping it over the ramp in the process.

\*KAN GA Ga ga ga\*

The rusty cage lands roughly on one of its corners, bending the cage out of shape. The latch with the locks on it popped off its hinges in the process.

\*UuuuRrraaaaaaaa\*

The bear charges into the cage again, this time opening it.

"Quickly! Get back into the truck, governor!" One of the men orders while arming himself with a spear that his partner handed over.

"Don't you DARE order me around! It is just some stupid bea-  
EEEEKKKK"

\*tatatata\* \*gon\*

The bear suddenly dashes and slams into the man, causing him to land on his ass.

\*kan\*

The fat man holds his spear horizontally, barely blocking the bear's biting maw.

"Save me you fools!"

One of the men stabs from one side of the bear while the other runs around and stabs it from the opposite side.

\*uuurrraaaaaaaaAAAA\*

The bear abruptly turns, flinging the men off their spears that remain lodged in the bear's flanks. The fat man takes the chance to get up and tries to run away into the truck.

\*mushi\*

The bear charges and bring down its right claw, raking the man's scalp all the way down to his waist.

"ku... hel..."

\*rrrrraaaaaa\*

\*goki\*

The fat man collapses onto the ground in pain. He struggles to crawl toward the truck before the bear bears down on him with his maw, crushing his vertebrates. The men get back up and try to kill the bear by forcing all their weight onto the spears as it attacks the barely moving fat man.

\*rrraaaaAAA\*

The bear swings around, slamming one man into the side of the truck while sending the other flying. The bear charges at the still falling man and mauls him viciously. The other man tries to enter the truck by opening the door and crawling in.

\*ban\* \*goki\*

The bear, noticing the movement, charges into the door, slamming it into the man's dangling leg. The door bounces back after crushing the man's leg.

"AAaaaaaaHHHHHHHH!"

\*hhaaaaaa haaaa\*

The bear drags the man out of the car, it releases the man's leg after he's out in the open. With its jaws opened wide, the bear tries to bite the remaining man's head.

\*zaku\* \*gushu\*

The man swings around at the last moment, stabbing the grizzly in its right eye while shielding himself with his right arm.

\*UUUUUURRRRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAA RRRRAAAAA\*

The bear swipes its claw down at the man continuously while thrashing in pain.

\*gabo\* \*gabo\* \*gabo\*

\*haaaaa... hhaaaaaaaa...\*

The wet, sticky sound of flesh being pulverized overlaps with the bear's heavy breathing. After calming down, the bear's nostril flares, turning toward the nearby waterway.

\* \* \* \* \*

\*bashan\*

\*pasha\*

A decent sized splash is followed by a smaller one, two figures emerge

from under the water's surface and move toward the shore.

\*buru buru\*

"Hahahaha, watch it big guy!"

A small gray fox with a mottled coat shakes itself dry next to a youth with short, black hair.

"Hm... strange... hey, where's your mom?" The youth looks around, "actually, why isn't there any birds singing... something feels wrong. Come on you." Opening the woven basket tied to a rope, the youth grabs the still struggling fish from the tip of his fishing spear and throws it into the basket. He secures the basket again before heading back home.

The yearling cub droops its ear, releases and re-secures the crab that's in its mouth before following the youth. The cub have seen this creature plenty of times before, its mother is indifferent about it, but she often left him with it when she went out hunting in the early days. It recalls the scent of another fox in its early memory, but it doesn't recall ever meeting it.

\*haaa haaaa haaaa\*

\*guurrrrrrrrrr\*

An extremely large grizzly bear with blood all over it and two sticks protruding from its sides moves toward the two, the young cub is the first to notice it, dropping the slightly crushed crab and starts growling. The youth reacts right away to the growling, easily spotting the bear. There's less than a hundred meters between the two of them and the bear, the youth's home is still several hundred meters further away, there are tall, strong trees nearby tens of meters away.



The youth drops everything save for his fishing spear and slowly backs away diagonally in a low posture, changing the foothold the bear will have to deal with in order to approach them. The open land leading to the shoreline angles downward, allowing an easy charge toward the water. As such, the youth is trying to make the shortest route between them to be on equal footing, and if possible, have it run uphill instead.

\*rraarraaaUUUrrrrrAAAA\*

The bear charges at the youth in a straight line after growling. The youth continues to back away slowly before picking up a decently sized rock in his right hand. Rotating the rock into a comfortable position, the youth keeps backing away slowly as the bear comes rushing in. The fox growls and yelps, taking hesitant steps. Taking careful aim, the youth whips the stone at the snout of the bear, temporarily stunning it. He grabs a handful of sand and stones from the ground before quickly dashing toward the trees while the bear tries to shake away the sudden pain with a \*UUURRAAAAA\*, the gray fox follows after the youth after staring at the bear for a split second longer.

The youth stops just inside the forest, where the thicker, taller trees are.

\*ffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuu\*

The youth takes a deep breath and tries to calm his nerves and recite his teachings. He starts talking to the gray fox for no particular reason aside from calming himself. "To defeat a bear, don't try to overpower it, it's stronger than you. Don't try to outrun it, it's faster than you. Don't try to climb out of its way, it can climb better than you. Exhaust it, anger it, watch its neck, pay attention to its movement, stay out of its reach, be a step ahead of it."

\*wasa wasa wasa wasa KAKA KA\*

\*UUURRRRAAAAAAA\*

The bear charges straight at the youth before suddenly stopping and thrashing around in pain. The spears lodged into its sides entangle themselves with the trees, one of them snaps while the other forcefully cleaves the wound wider before falling out completely. The thrashing bear effortly snaps saplings and young trees as it moves about haphazardly. The youth tries to calm his rapidly beating heart while backing away diagonally again, putting some larger trees between them. The bear stops thrashing, gets on its hind leg and releases a \*UUURRRRAAAAA\* before looking around with its 3 meter high vantage point. Spotting the shivering fox and the 2 legged enemy, it drops to all fours before charging toward them. It deftly sidesteps trees that gets in its way while completely overrunning smaller ones.

The youth throws his handful of sand and stone before moving into a slight uphill position. The bear stands on its legs and swipes down blindly, the youth has been following the movement of its head. Since its neck turned to the right, it will be using its left claw. He quickly moves toward the bear's right hand side and plants the fishing spear's rear end into ground the as the bear comes down from its swipe. Due to the its slightly lower elevation, it has a harder time using its full weight, still, the amount of strength is fearsome \*shiiii\* The fishing spear's tip stabs into the bear's throat, followed by a \*ka goki\* and snapping off. The gray fox takes this chance to bite at the bear's hind leg, who promptly sends it flying while still being blinded by the sand, making \*URRRRAA\* noises.

"Damn it..." The youth quickly swings his head to look for something to use before running past the bear. Seeing that the gray fox is okay and back on its feet, he gives a small sigh of relief before reaching

down for the spear that had been dislodged earlier, he inspects the spear while moving deeper into the woods. The spear is a little worn, but well made, it's still completely usable. It's spearhead is thick and wide with a cross section further down. He quickly circles back into an uphill position as the bear recovers.

The battle continues, with the youth moving in and giving a quick stab after it swipes. Since he already broke one spear, he isn't willing to risk breaking another one by trying to impale the grizzly. After dodging and counterattacking a few times, he notices the bear's missing right eye after, so he took advantage of it by always circling to the right after stabbing.

\*zaku\*

\*wasa wasa\*

\*zaku\*

\*wasa wasa\*

It's a one-sided fight with the youth stabbing, moving away, stabbing, moving away. The fight is going splendidly for the youth, as the bear's movements are slowing down. None of the wounds he had dealt were fatal, they are merely paper cuts by human standards. But this is a battle with "death by a thousand cuts" as its focus, so it's fine. Sensing the chance to finish off the bear, the youth tries to attack from the front this time. Unexpectedly, the bear didn't swipe at all after getting onto its hind legs, but drops back down while doing a horizontal swipe. Getting caught off guard, the youth stumbles backward and slams his head into a tree, the beast lunges forward with its maw after recovering from swiping.

\*guuurrrr kuuuu\*

\*AAARRRRRRRRRRRRRo\*

The young gray fox appears from behind the bear and bites its hind leg again. Out of nowhere, a gray shadow flies by and attaches itself to the bear's bleeding throat where the tip of the fishing spear is still embedded.

\* \* \* \* \*

Get up, get up, open eyes, damn it, OPEN!

I struggle to get back up to my feet after receiving a blow to the back of my head.

\*UUUURRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAA\*

\*yuuuuuukuuu shiiiiii\*

The bear is roaring while trying to claw the gray mass attached to its throat. Quickly blinking a few times to clear my vision, I realize a bloodied fox is biting onto it, barely holding on. Her rushing in probably saved me just now.

\*WWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Screaming a shout that dwarf the bear's roar, with a voice I don't recognize, "LET HER GO!" I rush in with a strength that I didn't know I had. I rapidly and forcefully attack the grizzle with abandon.

\*zaku zaku zaku zaku zaku zaku zaku zaku zaku zaku zaku\*

I repeatedly stab into its snout, ear and head. I had taken out its other

eye at some point. I don't remember much, I just keep stabbing, stabbing, stabbing and stab some more. The gray fox that had accompanied me on and off for the last few years lay limp on its side; a pool of blood forming underneath it. The young fox cub is whining next to it.

The bear is barely able to move, I do one deep lunge with the spear right into its mouth, giving it a twist before pulling the spear out. I keep on stabbing its head as tears and snot drips onto the forest floor.

The fox was something my father and I saved after it got caught in a badly done wire snare trap that I made to catch rabbits. She surprised me and kept an eye on me after I got dropped off here by a bunch of crooked politicians after my parents died fighting in the war. That one time she chased the rabbits into the water, we were both surprised. That other time when an eagle dove in to steal my fish basket, she popped out from the water and scared the eagle out of the air. During that horrible snowstorm that one year, it took shelter at my house after its mate got killed by something. I was there when she gave birth to her cubs, although only one survived, I feel she's the closest to a family I had since coming back. I can honestly say, if she wasn't there, my mind might have become broken from the loneliness and just trying to survive.

I regain my composure after my throat starts hurting. I must have been screaming without knowing, I'm pretty sure I've lost my voice for now. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I go to pick up the fox's corpse with the cub whining and following me. I'm going to give her a proper burial. I'm going to help take care of the cub. I will come back for the bear meat. There's one more mouth for me to feed now. I head back home with my bruised, battered, bloodied body with a new determination in my heart.

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*[Note: The beginning is in the perspective of the mother fox*

*Note 2: Yes, you don't see Hank, he haven't shown up yet.*

*Note 3: That one line near the beginning of chapter 13 is directly referring to this incident.]*

